

PREPARING FOR REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK:

THE AMERICAN STUDENT EXPERIENCE

by

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I have oddly known that I wanted to earn a PhD since the 8th grade. It was one of the life goals I listed in an autobiography assignment, which I still have. I could not have predicted then where life would take me. After a transformative study abroad semester in the spring of 2007, I struggled significantly with reverse culture shock. So, I started volunteering in the Study Abroad Office as a way to relive my own experiences and help others begin their sojourns. I found my passion for working in higher education during that time, and when I realized that I could earn a master's degree in higher education and later a doctorate, I knew I would study reverse culture shock for my dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

Historically, there has been more research available regarding how study abroad students experience culture shock versus how they experience reverse culture shock upon returning home. However, research has shown that reverse culture shock can often be more difficult to navigate than the initial culture shock students experience. By reason of that research on reverse culture shock, this study aims to address if students experience challenges with reverse culture shock and how they navigate that phenomenon. Additionally, the purpose of this research is to further inform the literature on how students make meaning of their study abroad and return experiences.

Thirty students were interviewed during this study through a qualitative process guided by these frameworks: the Expectations Model and the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation. The results of this study show that study abroad students want information regarding reverse culture shock and want to know what to expect for their return home from a study abroad program, but they want to receive this information at a time that is more relevant to them versus receiving it all during a pre-departure orientation, which is how the information is typically disseminated. Most interview participants experienced some level of reverse culture shock, and they wanted outlets for communication. Communication with others who have also lived abroad and experienced reverse culture shock was helpful for students when making meaning of their entire study abroad sojourn experience. An important finding in this study is that many returnees self-censor when it comes to discussing their study abroad programs, the opposite of an outlet for communication. Recommendations from this study include providing more outlets for returnees to gather together to share their experiences, send information about reverse culture shock to students prior to the end of their sojourn or just after they return home,

and provide information to family members of study abroad students regarding reverse culture shock so they can also learn how to support their returnees.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There is no denying there are many academic, professional, and personal benefits to participating in a study abroad program. A quick search of nearly any U.S. university's study abroad website will produce numerous benefits. Academically, two of the main benefits of study abroad participation are improved foreign language proficiency and a strong relationship between higher rates of retention and graduation (Hamir, 2011; Kuh, 2008; Metzger, 2006; Rhodes, Biscarra, Loberg, & Roller, 2012). Professionally, study abroad alumni were employed at a 4% higher rate than those who did not study abroad (Institute for the International Education of Students [IES], 2016), and they learned skills during the sojourn that they believe directly led to a job offer or later a promotion, such as an increased capacity to work through cultural differences and work with colleagues from different backgrounds (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017). Additionally, studying abroad opened students' eyes to more career possibilities or opportunities and the confidence to see those opportunities (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017). On a personal level, studying abroad provided numerous intangible benefits that also served students professionally and academically. Some of those benefits include cross-cultural competency, a higher tolerance for ambiguity, increased levels of flexibility, self-awareness, curiosity, and confidence (Dwyer, 2004; Farrugia & Sanger, 2017; Prieto-Arranz, Juan-Garau, & Mesquida-Mesquida, 2021).

Given the numerous benefits to studying abroad, it is not surprising that the number of U.S. students studying abroad each year is increasing, and the majority of those students are choosing short-term programs, which are classified as either a summer term program or a program that is eight weeks or less. Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, 347,099 undergraduate students in the United States participated in a study abroad program for academic

credit during the 2018/19 academic year (Institute for International Education [IIE] ¹, 2020), which is approximately 2% of the total undergraduate population in the U.S. The 2018/19 academic year data is being cited here because the 2019/20 academic year saw a decline of 53% from the previous year in study abroad participation to 162,633 students (IIE, 2021). The 2020/21 academic year saw a 91% decline from the previous year, down to only 14,549 students (IIE, 2022). Of the 347,099 higher education students who studied abroad in 2018/19 academic year, 65% of them participated in a short-term program. Before the pandemic, participation in short-term programs had been steadily increasing over the last 15 years, up from 51.4% in 2004/05 (IIE, 2007). Alternatively, participation in mid-length (one semester, or one or two quarters) and long-term (academic or calendar year) programs had been steadily declining. Mid-length participation has decreased from 42.3% of participants in 2004/05 to 32.9% in 2018/19 and 28.3% in 2020/21, and long-term dropped from 6.3% in 2004/05 to 2.2% in 2018/19, then saw an increase to 7.3% in 2020/21; however, this should not be considered a trend for an increase in long-term study abroad programming, but rather a result of studying abroad in the Covid-19 era (IIE, 2007; 2020; 2022). Study abroad professionals can expect to see numbers returning to the 2018/19 academic year levels, or higher, in the coming academic years as Covid-19 travel restrictions continue to be eliminated.

Culture shock and reverse culture shock experienced during and after studying abroad is an important topic to research and discuss because there are more students participating in study abroad programs than ever before, which could lead to an increase in the number of students

¹ The Open Doors report is annually produced by IIE, and it provides data regarding the past year's statistics on students in the United States who study abroad for academic credit since 1985, as well as information on international students and scholars in the U.S since 1919. The Open Doors report is based off survey data submitted by over 3,000 accredited U.S. institutions, and it is the leading data source for international higher education. This data is pre-COVID-19 pandemic.

seeking support services after returning from a study abroad sojourn. Others may struggle without any support and the extent of their challenges may remain unknown. Culture shock refers to the stress experienced by those who go abroad, such as study abroad students, upon entry into their host country as they assimilate to a new and unfamiliar culture (Oberg, 1960). Reverse culture shock, also referred to as re-entry shock, is the stress students experience upon returning from their study abroad sojourn, or time abroad, as they readjust, or re-assimilate, to the life they left behind prior to the study abroad journey, which begins at the time of application and ends well after a student has returned home (Adler, 1981). During reverse culture shock, students might knowingly or unknowingly realize they changed during the sojourn while the people and places who stayed behind changed little, regardless of the length of the sojourn.

One significant change that is rarely discussed is the way students view the United States and their hometowns or home states upon returning from the sojourn. It is not uncommon for students' attitudes about the United States to change or mature, from taking on the host culture's views or standpoints on plastic usage and recycling up to the realization of the power and privilege of being a U.S. citizen. This change in attitude and sentiment often manifests itself as a newly found criticism of the U.S., and it is often a new experience and unexpected, deepening the experience of reverse culture shock because, again, the student has changed but family and friends back home have not. Family and friends who did not study abroad do not or cannot understand these changes in the student post-sojourn, and this lack of understanding may sometimes lead to conflict between the student and those who have not had a similar experience. This study aims to shed light on the experiences American students have while abroad and once they return home, as well as to answer questions regarding students' needs for a variety of resources and support after returning home and to university.

The majority of published research focuses on the culture shock or cultural adjustment required when students study abroad. Much fewer studies have been conducted on the experience of study abroad students returning home, who encounter reverse culture shock. Some researchers believe reverse culture shock is more traumatic or challenging than the initial culture shock ever was (Adler, 1981; Altweck & Marshall, 2015; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Szkudlarek, 2010), and others believe that culture shock and reverse culture shock are equally challenging (Brein & David, 1971). Based on my experience working for or with several university study abroad offices in the United States, students are prepared for their study abroad sojourn through pre-departure services, orientations, or online programming. Even though universities often provide ample information and guidance to students in the pre-departure stage, there tends to be inadequate preparation or support services available for students who return from a study abroad program and are struggling with reverse culture shock. When information is given to students about reverse culture shock, it is most often during the pre-departure orientations at a time when students are focused on leaving the United States, not returning to it, essentially making the information irrelevant and easily forgotten. Students who struggle with reverse culture shock often report experiencing anxiety, depression, or difficulty returning to school (Gaw, 2000; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Given that more university students are reporting mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, than ever before (Chessman & Taylor, 2019), even without the potential added stressor of reverse culture shock, students who do study abroad need to be better prepared for stressors and challenges they are likely to experience on their return.

Among the limited programs available for returnees, the programs are often one-time events that celebrate the return of the student without offering guidance for navigating the

challenges of reverse culture shock. Multiple events should be offered to allow returnees the opportunity to meet one another more than once in order to build some rapport and communicate with each other about their own experiences. A re-entry program created and executed well will determine the success of a study abroad program as it will aid students in the “development of adjustment skills and intercultural competencies” (Thebodo & Marx, 2005, p. 293). Study abroad administrators should not rely on students to manage reverse culture shock on their own without resources or support. As Edwards (2009) posited,

Can we assume that students can simply apply capabilities and perspectives they have acquired [abroad] to whatever courses they take once they are back on campus, and that the transformation that they have gone through will allow to them to experience these courses differently, and to exercise and continue to develop their new capabilities?

(p.115)

In one study, it was found that an initial debriefing or “welcome home” meeting was helpful, but only in the short-term, and it did not lessen the stress of reverse culture shock (Cox, 2004). Ongoing support was needed for those experiencing elevated levels of reverse culture shock. In another study, which focused on expectation gaps of study abroad students, various forms of communication (comparisons, humor, complaints, gossip) proved immensely useful for students struggling with expectation gaps while abroad (Pitts, 2009). If these interactions were useful for students while abroad, these interactions could be useful for those who have returned, but, again, students need multiple opportunities to communicate and find support. Many study abroad offices only provide basic suggestions listed in a “returned students” section on the university’s or college’s study abroad website for how to get involved on campus in order to meet international students or other study abroad returnees. Many suggestions online do not

make any reference to how students can “unpack” their study abroad experience, make meaning of their experiences, or how to assimilate back to life at home while still maintaining a sense of the identity they developed during their time abroad, or if they do provide guides for students, the onus is on the students to read through the different articles and resources listed (e.g., “Navigating Re-Entry,” n.d.; “Returning from Study Away,” n.d.; “Returned Students,” n.d.).

As stated, there is a gap in the literature regarding the way students are prepared for and process the study abroad experience, especially regarding reverse culture shock, and how students may have changed during the sojourn. Learning how students make meaning of their study abroad and re-entry experiences, and how they work through reverse culture shock, will guide study abroad professionals and university counselors or campus health personnel as to the type of information and resources they should provide to students and their families prior to a student’s departure, prior to their return home, and after returning home. The information gathered throughout this study will also be beneficial when creating “welcome back” programming for returnees or when preparing resources for them. It is well known that students can change in a variety of ways when studying abroad, but they may not understand those changes or how to deal with those changes when confronted by others about how they changed. Young adults need guidance, resources, and support to effectively work through their experiences, emotions, and to understand how they have changed upon returning from studying abroad. As it is discussed later in Chapter Two, the number of mental health issues among university students is on the rise, and even though a student who chooses to study abroad likely has the mental fortitude to navigate the challenges of that experiences, it does not mean the student is fully prepared to take on all aspects of the studying abroad and returning home. And while those same students tend to grow and mature differently than their peers who did not study

abroad due to their international experiences (Hadis, 2005), they may still be surprised by the difficulties of returning to university after the sojourn. This study aims to find ways in which universities can better prepare students for their return and support them afterwards.

Purpose of the Study

Using semi-structured interviews to examine participants' experiences in detail, the purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate study abroad returnees' experiences at a university in the United States: how they were prepared for the returnee experience prior to the sojourn and prior to their return (such as communication or programming describing reverse culture while the student was studying abroad); their recollection of the information and resources provided to them regarding the re-entry process and what they should expect to experience upon their return home; as well as the changes, if any, students realized in themselves after the return. Based on the Expectations Model and the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation, this study examines how students navigated their experiences specifically as Americans abroad, and how they perceive themselves as Americans, and the privileges afforded to them (or not) as Americans, upon their return compared to their perceptions prior to their sojourn. The intention of this study is two-fold. First it is to provide university administrators with more information regarding how students navigate the re-entry process in order to offer more targeted preparations and programming for students nearing the end of their sojourn or shortly after returning home. The targeted preparations and programming would then be aimed at guiding students through the re-entry process so they can learn how to integrate their new post-study abroad identities with their former home or university environment. The second intention is to inform study abroad professionals if and how American students' perceptions of the United States change after their sojourn, and how returnees grapple

with those new perceptions and grow from them. Reverse culture shock, while sometimes challenging to navigate, can be a positive growth experience. However, current efforts at many universities to support students' post-sojourn do not continually engage the students over time, which is a crucial component for students struggling with reverse culture shock. There are negative aspects of reverse culture shock as well as positive aspects, but it is not a singular event, it takes place over days, months, and even years for some people. Therefore, offering resources or support to students on a continual basis could be beneficial for returnees.

Significance of the Study

The ultimate goal of this research is to provide information that can inform professionals about how students experience and navigate reverse culture shock after only receiving information about the phenomenon during a pre-departure orientation. This information will be useful for study abroad practitioners who want to provide more guidance for study abroad returnees and provide more information accessible to family members and friends who might not be aware of preparations they need to make in order to support the returnee. The results could also guide practitioners on how to support students who must return home earlier than expected and how their adjustment is different from those who return home at the expected time. Finally, this information could potentially be used by various private, or governmental and non-governmental organizations that send employees overseas on assignments which require them to move abroad for an extended period of time. This study could help these organizations to guide and prepare individuals or families who will be transitioning back to the United States after living overseas. Even the Department of State (DoS) does not provide a significant amount of information on reverse culture shock at a time when it is relevant to those employees or family members returning to the United States, often discussing it during trainings two to five years

before a foreign service officer and their family will return to the U.S. [personal conversations with foreign service officers employed by the DoS, 2023]. The DoS houses the Foreign Service Institute, which offers many online, day-long courses to DoS employees and their eligible family members. However, none of the courses specifically discuss reverse culture shock, nor are they mandatory to complete.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following literature review will provide more detailed information on culture shock and reverse culture shock, as well as an often-shared diagram to explain culture shock and reverse culture shock to students and their families during orientations: The W-curve of adjustment, which was developed in 1963, is still used in some orientations and resources as a guide for culture shock and reverse culture shock to students. There have been some variations of the standard “W” shape, but they still hold the basic premise of the original “W” curve in their assumptions that culture shock is experienced in a linear fashion without regression to previously experienced emotions or stages. One example of a variations is Adler’s (1975) “Contact-Disintegration-Reintegration-Autonomy-Independence” model, is slightly critical of the W-curve because it does not mention how one’s identity can change during the progression through the various stages. Adler’s model still breaks down the experience into steps or phases that are completed linearly though. The review goes on to discuss studies that focused on students’ experiences with reentry and how their experiences with culture shock correlated with the length and/or the location of their sojourn.

While some studies consider the increasing rates of mental health issues for university students, not all studies do, which is why it is included in this literature review. Furthermore, studies have not fully discussed how important communication is for students upon their return and how often students are not discussing their experiences for fear of being ridiculed or ignored, thus leading to a self-censorship of their experiences. Following self-censorship, studies regarding students’ experiences specifically as Americans abroad and how their nationality and citizenship shaped their experiences and their returns will be summarized. This is an important aspect of the return process, as some students tend to reject their American-ism in favor of the

new culture and ideas experienced while abroad, sometimes struggling to integrate the two. In closing, information is shared regarding the gap in the literature for the way students navigate the reentry experience after a study abroad sojourn.

Culture Shock and Reverse Culture Shock

It is common for students (or anyone) to experience culture shock upon visiting or moving to a new place that is different. Oberg (1954; 1960; 1966) is often credited with being the first person to define “culture shock,” even though Lysgaard created the U-curve of cultural adjustment, not based off of Oberg’s definition, in 1955. The U-curve, which is discussed in more detail below, states that cultural adjustment has four distinct stages of adaptation: honeymoon, culture shock, adaptation, and recovery. Research conducted by Dutton (2011) shows the term “culture shock” was used multiple times in research and published articles as far back as 1929. In those early papers, culture shock was most often compared to shell shock, with many similarities existing between the two terms (Dutton, 2011). La Brack (2010) also claims that Oberg’s definition was an expansion on the first study of culture shock, which was researched by Cora DuBois in 1951, and Oberg just summarized culture shock in a way to make it applicable to anyone introduced to a new culture. So, while Oberg was not the first to define it, he provided a definition to culture shock that has been widely used in related publications ever since (cited over 5500 times according to Google Scholar):

Culture shock is a disease precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social interaction. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips, ... (1954, p.177).

Oberg's definition of culture shock being a "disease" is a bit more intense than Furnham's (2012) definition of culture shock, "a serious, acute, and sometimes chronic affective reaction to a new (social) environment" (p.14). However, they are both similar in description. Students are often prepared for culture shock prior to the study abroad sojourn through university pre-departure orientations and discussions with study abroad advisors or program coordinators. There is more research available on culture shock than reverse culture shock, and often-times, reverse culture shock is a small piece of the conversation, tucked away at the end of an article or study. It is as if there is an assumption that since the home country is already well known, students do not need any "explanation" or preparation regarding what life will be like once they return home (Szkudlarek, 2010).

However, students (and their families) may not expect to experience reverse culture shock, or they might have forgotten about the concept if it was discussed at a pre-departure orientation among other more exciting information about their time abroad and the logistics of their arrival and housing in the host country. Therefore, they are not usually prepared for the experience of reverse culture shock. Students often return home from a study abroad program without fully understanding how much they have changed while away and how little their friends and family have changed, if at all (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Students may not realize "the changes that have taken place in themselves until returning home and facing the challenge of readjusting to their previous culture" (Christofi & Thompson, 2007, p.54), which typically only happens after the excitement of the return has worn off (Storti, 2003). The start of that realization is the start of reverse culture shock.

Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1960) first defined reverse culture shock as "post-return adjustment problems" (p. 39). They went on to state:

As a consequence of the resocialization experience in the alien environment, a sojourner tends to acquire expectation patterns compatible with his new social system. Indeed, if his interactions within the new society are particularly gratifying, he may identify rather deeply with the new group. The result, of course, is that the sojourner typically finds himself out of phase with his home culture on his return (p.39).

Christofi and Thompson (2007) later (over)simplified Gullahorn and Gullahorn's description and defined reverse culture shock as the "temporal psychological difficulties returnees experience in the initial stage of the adjustment process at home after having lived abroad for some time" (p.53). This is an example of how the experience of reverse culture shock has been minimized in the existing literature. This time, the experience is described as only an "initial stage of the adjustment process," not as it should be seen, as an entire process of adjustment in and of itself. For U.S. university students, reverse culture shock is a challenging experience of readapting to life in the United States. It is the most difficult aspect of the entire study abroad journey because students often do not realize to what extent they have changed or their perspectives have changed while abroad (Lerstrom, 1995; Werkman, 1980; Xia, 2009). In addition to the (likely) excitement of returning home, a student might also be grieving the loss of the host country, experiencing a sort of reverse-homesickness as the host country became the student's new home during the sojourn, which is sometimes referred to as emotional distance (Fray, 1988). During reverse culture shock, a student might also be grieving the loss of who they were abroad, if the host culture was more open and accepting of them or if the cultural values at home were more conservative than the host country – this is referred to as moral distance (Fray, 1988). Reverse culture shock is multi-faceted, and students could be experiencing a number of different feelings just prior to and upon their return home, which is why study abroad

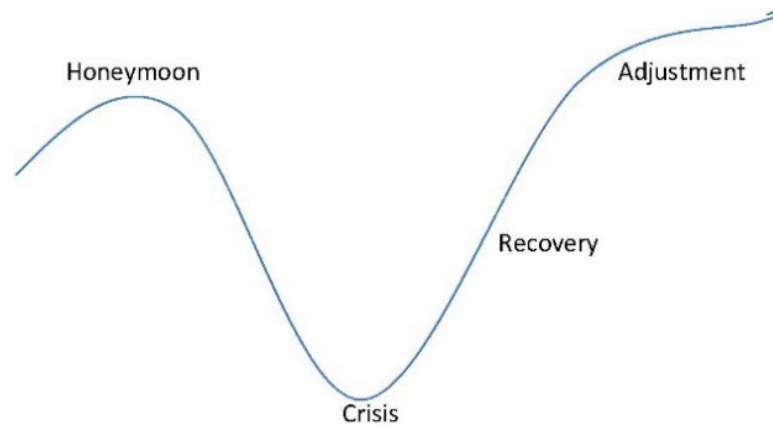
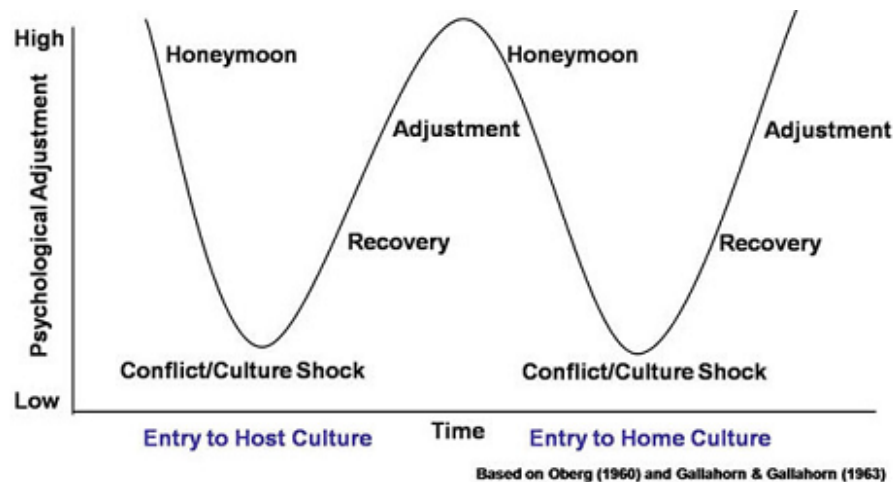
administrators must do more to prepare students for reverse culture shock so they can recognize it and seek support, when needed.

It is important to note that culture shock and reverse culture shock are not inherently bad experiences and should be viewed as positive experiences, even if they bring about negative symptoms and emotions. Both types of “shock” are important aspects of traveling abroad that can lead to true growth and transformation. The adjustment required from either type of “shock” is sometimes split into two different types: psychological adjustment (physical and mental health) and socio-cultural adjustment (social skills related to the home culture and the host culture) (Altweck & Marshall, 2015; Searle & Ward, 1990). Students who are put into unfamiliar environments and experience the challenge of culture shock often gain more cultural awareness and acceptance, have a higher appreciation for diversity and diverse cultures, and tend to be less ethnocentric (Boyle, Nackerud, & Kilpatrick, 1999; Kim, 2001; Milstein, 2005; Tohyama, 2008). It is then reasonable to also state challenges experienced during reverse culture shock can lead to growth and transformation for U.S. university students, such as gaining a more critical lens toward the United States, because even though their environments back home are familiar, they have changed themselves, so home is not the same as it was. Students then have to relearn how to navigate the combination of who they are after the sojourn and who friends and family remember they were prior to the sojourn. Home is no longer what students remembered it to be while they were away (Altweck & Marshall, 2015); however, when students are able to integrate their host culture with their home culture easily, their adjustment upon their return home is often easier (Altweck & Marshall, 2015; Cox, 2004).

The W-Curve of Culture Shock

In an effort to explain culture shock and reverse culture shock more easily, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) introduced the “W-curve” of cultural adjustment (Figure 2.2), which was an update to the existing “U-curve” (Figure 2.1) created by Lysgaard in 1955. While the U-curve and the W-curve are usually referred to as hypotheses and not theories, they are generally accepted to adequately describe the process of initial culture shock through reverse culture shock, especially the W-curve. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 are visual representations often shared at study abroad pre-departure orientations, particularly 2.2, in order to prepare students for the various emotions they might experience upon arrival, during the sojourn, and upon their return home. Even the U.S. Department of State was using the W-curve on their website as recently as 2017 to provide guidance to employees and their families to describe the honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment phases often experienced with culture shock and reverse culture shock (Transition Center, 2017).

Both the U-curve and W-curve start off with the same U-shape. Figure 2.2 extends the single U-curve into the W-curve. Both curves demonstrate how upon arrival in the host country, a student is often in a honeymoon phase, where everything is new and exciting. The student is often overwhelmed with excitement to be in the host country. As things settle down after the first few days or weeks, culture shock often sets in, which is the bottom of the curve, indicating the lowest point in the emotional range of the curve. As the student becomes more familiar with the culture, lifestyle, and different education system, the student reaches a period of adjustment and assimilation, which is where the U-curve ends.

Figure 2. 1*U-curve of Cultural Adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955)***Figure 2. 2***W-curve of Cultural Adjustment (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963)*

The W-curve (Figure 2.2) builds on the U-curve to include the re-entry or reverse culture shock. It mirrors the U-curve in the sense that upon the return home, the student is in another honeymoon-like phase, then after the excitement of returning home wears off, reality sets in that the study abroad program is over. Students often begin comparing their experiences abroad with

their experiences back home, looking at their home culture, institution, and country in a different, often more critical, light than ever before. As the student adjusts to life back home and finds a balance between life during the sojourn and life after the sojourn, they are considered to have reached a reintegration or re-adaptation stage.

These curves are easy to understand, and they might provide a baseline for what students can expect, but they are far too simplistic. It is inaccurate to assume that students will follow a linear approach when experiencing culture shock and reverse culture shock. The end goal of adjustment when working through reverse culture shock must be questioned and more clearly defined. How do students work through the crises and recovery stages to reach adjustment? The linear approach does not leave any room for students to regress or have setbacks, and it assumes that once adjustment has been achieved, the experience is over. Furthermore, there are more appropriate models that can be used to describe the student experience and ways to prepare them for the emotions involved during the experiences of culture shock and reverse culture shock. These models are described later in the Theoretical Frameworks section.

Experiencing Reentry

It is common for students who are experiencing any level of reverse culture shock to experience anxiety, depression, grief, and/or trouble re-acclimating socially and academically (Brubaker, 2017; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Cox, 2004; Davis et al., 2010; Gaw, 2000; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). The stress of readjusting does not have a timeline. Preparing students for this adjustment is important; and, given the diversity of students, there cannot be a one-size fits all approach. Several factors influence how a student handles reverse culture shock, such as age, gender, background, place of study, home environment, length of sojourn, level of success initially adapting to life overseas, etc. With all of these factors under consideration, it is

not surprising that the U- and W-curves of cultural adjustment are often discounted and should be used only in overly broad terms.

It is also important to consider that not all students experience the same level of reverse culture shock or the same negative feelings about their return home. Reentry experiences are often described as “bittersweet,” which can be broken down into two components, “bitter” and “sweet.” Paying attention to these multifaceted emotions can guide professionals to better prepare students for the effects of reentry (Kartoshkina, 2015). The “bitter” side includes the grieving processes over feelings of loss of and longing for the host country, and the “sweet” side includes the excitement of returning home to family and friends. Kartoshkina (2015) recommends taking on a “more inclusive perspective and consider viewing [the reentry experience] as more balanced” (p.43). The negative aspects of reentry tend to take over most of the literature available on the topic, so Kartoshkina’s perspective and suggestions shed valuable light on the concept that reentry can also be a positive experience.

Students who have an easy time “accepting and incorporating a host culture’s identity” will struggle more when they return to their home culture than those students who had a difficult time initially adjusting (Wedin, 2010, p.388). These students had created an “idealized perception of what home would be like on their return,” so when the reality of home was different from expected, the students were frustrated and disheartened (Christofi & Thompson, 2007, p.61). Many students felt torn between their newfound appreciation and love of their host country and the emotional, historical connection found in their home country.

The feeling of being torn between the two countries can lead some students to develop ambivalence toward both. There is a feeling of loss for students as “[they] can never go home again because it does not exist” (Furnham, 2012, p.15). For many students, they have changed

significantly enough that even though home did not change, or changed minimally, while they were gone, home will never be the same for them, and the home they carried in their memories during their study abroad sojourn does not actually exist anymore (Furnham, 2012; Martin, 1984). While this implies a negative experience for students, it can be positive, depending on how they viewed or felt about their homes prior to studying abroad. Students' various backgrounds, life experiences, and personal and familial cultures could also impact their feelings about both the study abroad location and home. Additionally, Cressey (2000) found that reverse culture shock can provide "a deeper understanding of one's own culture, and one derives important insights about who one is and why and how one came to have a particular moral and philosophical outlook," which further proves reverse culture shock can be a positive experience, even if it is challenging to navigate (p.47).

Traditional college-aged students have a much harder time dealing with reverse culture shock, as they experience it at a higher level of intensity, than older, more mature adults with a higher level of self-awareness, and the more feelings of reverse culture shock increased, the less likely college-aged students are to seek help or support services (Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Students are often impressionable and have not "found themselves" yet, whereas older, more established adults are often more secure in their beliefs. When the younger adults experience a new culture that has different beliefs or attitudes, and they no longer have the influence of family and friends at home, they tend to latch-on to those different beliefs, and they are not willing to let go of them upon reentry to the home culture (Martin, 1984).

Martin's (1984) and Gaw's (2000) research slightly contradict a study, outside of higher education, which focused on expatriates of all ages, which showed younger people have an easier time with acculturation and reentry than adults do (Altweck & Marshall, 2015). The adults were

more likely to experience cultural conflict and challenges with reentry. However, it is important to note that Altweck's and Marshall's study separated participants into two age groups: 18 and younger versus 19 and older. In the older group, there were 132 participants, with an average age of 35, and a standard deviation of 11.2, so it is difficult to fully compare the research by Gaw and Gullahorn & Gullahorn with the research by Altweck & Marshall. Research conducted by J. Ben Cox (2004) does support Gaw's (2000) findings. Cox (2004) found that of those U.S. citizens who worked abroad for six months or longer, the young expatriates, in their early to mid-20s, have a harder time with reentry compared to those older than 30. So, Altweck's and Marshall's (2015) study, along with Cox's (2004) and Gaw's (2000) studies, could point to traditional college-aged persons (or students) as the age group most likely to struggle with reentry when compared to other age groups.

In addition to lower levels of maturity, self-awareness, and secure beliefs, students' levels of expectations regarding culture shock and reverse culture shock and how it would affect them predicts how they might handle both types of culture shock (Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Students who were fully expecting to experience culture shock upon entry or reverse culture shock upon re-entry were better prepared to navigate their experiences (Szkudlarek, 2010). Expectation gaps contribute to adjustment issues, and the larger the gap, the more trouble sojourners have with adjustment (Cox, 2004; Martin, 1984; Pitts, 2009). Pitts (2009) goes on to state that expectation gaps "have an immediate, stress-evoking impact" on students who sojourn. In her research, students were experiencing feelings of disappointment that their time abroad was not turning out the way they had expected it to or the way their friends and family back home expected. A similar finding is discussed in research by Fanari et al. (2021), where students struggled to discuss anything other than positive experiences while abroad because that is the

only thing people wanted to hear, which led to students exaggerating the positives and omitting the negatives of their study abroad experiences. These students learned to manage the stress of the expectation gaps through various forms of “talk,” and through those forms were also able to adjust different expectations. While providing an outlet of expression for the students in Pitts’ research helped the students manage their expectations, preparing students with the concept of expectation gaps prior to going abroad and prior to returning could cut down on the amount of stress students feel in the first place or at least prepare them for the stress so they can more easily recognize it. Prior to returning from the sojourn, students should be prepared again with the knowledge of expectation gaps, how to recognize those gaps, and how they might affect their return home. Discussing the management of internal and external expectations and providing resources for the handling of expectation gaps to the sojourners could eliminate some of the common stressors many students feel upon the start of their sojourn and during the initial weeks of their return home after the sojourn.

Sojourn Length

It has been hypothesized that all study abroad students, regardless of program length, experience some form of reverse culture shock; however, research does not definitively support this claim. Some research suggests that the longer the duration of a study abroad program is directly correlated to a more challenging reverse culture shock experience (Adler, 1981; Gaw, 2000). Tomlin, Miller, Schellhase, New, Karwa, and Ouma (2014) studied the reverse culture shock experienced by students who completed international pharmacy practice experiences. The authors concluded that the time it takes for students to re-adapt to life at home is correlated to the amount of time spent abroad. They were also able to conclude that students who had already spent time abroad, and therefore had experienced reentry shock previously, were more easily

able to adjust than their peers who had not spent a significant amount of time abroad prior to their sojourn. The conclusion that previous time spent abroad correlates with a less challenging experience of reverse culture shock is also supported by Christofi and Thompson (2007), who also found that students who were abroad for less than six months had an easier time readjusting to life in the home country than those who were abroad longer than six months.

In a recent study by Fanari, Lieu, and Foerster (2021), they were also able to conclude that students who studied abroad for a longer period of time experienced a higher degree of difficulty readjusting back home compared to those who studied abroad for a shorter period. Time spent abroad was important in this study as it related to the length of time a student experienced reverse culture shock. As time passed, more students felt their lives returning to “normal,” or at least a “new normal,” and the negative challenges of reverse culture shock dissipated. The students who had spent time abroad before also indicated that it was easier to return the second or third time when compared to the first time because they knew what to expect.

Sojourn Location

There are several variables regarding the location of the sojourn that have shown to affect the level of reverse culture shock that students experience: the level and ease of integration into the host culture, the degree of difference between home and host country, the ease at which sojourners can contact friends and family at home (Martin & Harrell, 1996). The higher degree at which a student integrates into the host culture, the more difficult the reentry process will be (Harris & Moran, 1991; Martin & Harrell, 1996), unless the sojourner is able to integrate the new host culture with their home culture in a way that combines the two somewhat equally, then students will not struggle as much with reentry (Altweck & Marshall, 2015; Cox, 2004).

Students may begin to see themselves as part of the host culture, sharing viewpoints and mannerisms of the host culture. If a host country is vastly different from the home country, and the student has a high level of integration, the transition back home will be even more challenging. Students may have changed their own values in order to integrate into the host country or host culture (Martin & Harrell, 1996). Whereas, if the backgrounds of the students and their native language and home culture are more similar to the host culture, students will not experience as much stress or challenges upon their return. The similarities or vast differences between the host country's and home country's geographies, cultures, climates, politics (the list goes on) are often referred to as perceived cultural distance (Altweck & Marshall, 2015; Pitts, 2016; Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009).

Interestingly, other studies found little to no relationship between perceived cultural distance and the ability to assimilate at the start of a sojourn or the degree of reverse culture shock experienced upon return (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Adler (1981) also found the opposite to be true for corporate employees: the location of the sojourn and the level of similarities or differences between the location and the home country did not influence whether reverse culture shock was experienced. Cultural similarities between the home country and the country of the sojourn did not mean it was an easier transition upon re-entry. However, corporate employees could be described as the more self-aware and more mature adults that Gaw (2000) and Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963) discussed as having less issues with reentry, as cited previously.

In current times, Wi-Fi availability and accessibility in the host country could also have a significant impact on how much students are able integrate themselves into the host country. Wi-Fi is more readily available in most countries than it was ten or fifteen years ago, and now

students can more easily stay connected with just a smartphone instead of needing a laptop and/or an internet café. Remaining connected to supportive friends and family back home can sometimes ease the transition of re-entry for some students because they will have kept abreast of any changes that took place at home while they were away (Cox, 2004; Martin & Harrell, 1996; Szkudlarek, 2010). Therefore, upon returning home, they will not be as surprised by most changes that have taken place. However, the more time they are in contact with family and friends at home, the less time they are integrating themselves into the host culture, which defeats the purpose of studying abroad.

Finally, another important aspect to consider is the cultural similarities a student might experience in their host country if they are a heritage student from that country. For example, a student growing up in the United States, but in a predominantly Vietnamese culture at home, may not experience the same level of culture shock upon studying in Vietnam or returning from a sojourn in Vietnam. Or one could argue that a Vietnamese heritage student may experience a high level of reverse culture shock upon returning to the United States because while studying in Vietnam, the student was part of the majority, and upon returning home to the U.S., the student is part of the minority population again (Martin & Harrell, 1996).

Mental Health in Study Abroad Students

As previously cited, it is common for the experience of reverse culture shock to lead to anxiety, depression and/or trouble re-acclimating socially and academically (Gaw, 2000; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). The following risk factors can contribute to the development of mental health illnesses among study abroad participants: jetlag and irritability (Duke, 2014), alcohol use and abuse (Duke, 2014; Pedersen, Larimer, & Lee, 2010), internet usage (Coleman & Chafer, 2010; Mikal, 2011; Shaw & Gant, 2002), previous mental health disorders (Lucas,

2009), and expectation gaps (Pitts, 2009). The lack of sleep and challenge of regulating the body to a new sleep schedule is more difficult for some (Duke, 2014). When students first arrive to their host culture, jet lag and fatigue can be the two biggest contributing factors to the initial feelings of anxiety and depression. While these feelings are common during the first few days or shortly following the honeymoon phase after arrival, these feelings should eventually subside. If depression and anxiety persist or get worse, the student should seek help. It is important to discuss these risk factors with students prior to their journey abroad, and even more so prior to and upon their return. The level of preparedness for reverse culture shock, along with perceived cultural distance and length of the sojourn, was found to be a strong indicator for how students experience and work through it (Presbitero, 2016).

According to Lucas (2009), alcohol abuse and binge drinking during study abroad programs is a frequent occurrence. Often, study abroad participants have not met the legal drinking age of 21 years old in the United States, so when they study abroad in a country where the legal drinking age is lower, usually 18, they tend to binge drink. Pedersen et al. (2010) stated that “heavy drinking while abroad can lead to violence, arrest, sexual assault, and promote negative stereotypes of Americans” (p.535). Furthermore, the research conducted by Pedersen et al. (2010) concluded that college study abroad participants drastically increased their alcohol consumption levels while they were abroad, and those students also reported a continuation of heavy drinking levels upon returning home.

Surprisingly, internet usage can also contribute to adjustment issues and subsequently mental health issues when students are participating in a study abroad program. In general, not just specific to study abroad students, as internet usage increases, there tends to be a decrease in a student’s academic performance and social engagement, alongside an increase in feelings of

depression and loneliness (Shaw and Grant, 2002). Studies indicate both positives and negatives when it comes to internet usage by study abroad participants. In a study conducted by Coleman and Chafer (2010), students who reported having elevated levels of homesickness also reported spending copious amounts of time online, connecting with friends and family back home. The internet and social networking sites can be seen as extensions of a support system back home (Mikal, 2011). Students may reach out to family or friends who have remained in their home country during stressful or challenging times, especially in the beginning of a program when the student is not familiar or comfortable with the new acquaintances. Mikal (2011) went on to note that some students “look at their social support networks back home as ‘paused.’ Students use the internet to provide socio-emotional support, thus reminding friends and family of the students’ secured places within those networks” (p.21). Mikal’s research later notes that even though students had more access to support, when considering the prevalence of the internet and Wi-Fi, students still reported experiencing higher levels of stress.

When discussing the mental health of study abroad students, it is important to consider the increase in the number of mental health concerns experienced by college students as reported by college administrators (Locke, Bieschke, Castonguay, & Hayes, 2012). The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) also confirms this increase in mental health among college students in a 2012 report titled, “College Students Speak: A Survey Report on Mental Health.” The 2012 NAMI report is based off a national survey of college students who suffer from one or more mental health issues. As the 2012 NAMI report mentions, the increase in mental health conditions among college students “places pressure on schools to provide the services and supports that are necessary for these students to stay in school and to achieve academic success” (p.4). This pressure does not dissipate or go away when a student decides to study abroad.

While mental health illnesses are becoming more openly discussed, there is still a stigma that remains, which hinders the desire or ability to see help, so finding more ways to make students comfortable in searching for assistance and making that search easier are both crucial steps in providing safe environments for college students (NAMI, 2012), especially those students experiencing reverse culture shock. According to research by Ryan and Twibill (200), there is a correlation between long-term sojourns, mental health, and cultural adaptation.

This is further proof that students need to be prepared that they might experience reverse culture shock and that they need continuous support services and resources once they return home. Not all study abroad returnees will need the continuous support, but some will. Cox's 2004 study found that debriefing sessions upon reentry with the younger population "helped participants to identify better (cognitively) with the home culture but did not significantly lessen the distress (emotionally) and social difficulty (behaviorally) of repatriation" (p.215). This indicates that ongoing support services could be beneficial for this age-group, especially at a time when there is a greater focus on the mental health of university students. In line with Cox's findings on the benefits of a debriefing, Davis et al. (2010) conducted a study of thirty-five Missionary Kids (MKs), ages 18 – 20, who had recently returned to the United States after having lived abroad on average of 3-5 years. These MKs were participating in a 13-day MK Transitions Seminar or reentry program. Prior to the start of the program, 43% of the participants reported increased anxiety and depression, as well as a decrease in overall psychological wellness, and 66% of the participants indicated an increase in stress levels upon their reentry to the United States. After the MK Transition Seminar, all participants indicated lower levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, as well as increased levels of psychological well-being, which could mean that the Seminar was beneficial for the participants. The Seminar gave participants

the opportunity to meet other returnees, share stories, and learn from other each other. If applied to higher education or a university setting, it is possible that a similar seminar or conference could be beneficial for study abroad returnees.

Efforts to Ease Reentry Challenges

Based on personal accounts and researching numerous university websites, many study abroad offices attempt to support returnees through one-time events or contests, such as “Welcome Back” socials with free food, peer advisor programs (both paid and volunteer) where returnees guide prospective study abroad students on options and the application process, and study abroad photo contests (with or without prizes). These types of reentry programming are fleeting. None of them are long-lasting efforts that would truly aid students in navigating the reentry process, help them make meaning of their experiences, and guide them through their re-assimilation to life back at the home university. Some study abroad offices, such the one at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, put together returnee packets that cover a range of topics regarding reentry, starting with thought provoking activities about students’ own experiences and ending with information on graduate schools and interning or working abroad. The *Resource Guide for Returned Students* (2019) is over thirty pages, and the information could be useful for students who are willing to read it. It could also be used by faculty or study abroad coordinators who lead cohorted programs and meet with students regularly while abroad and/or upon the return.

Other offices link to a variety of resources on their websites, but they do not truly offer the students the resources they need to connect with other returnees or speak to someone about making meaning from their experiences regularly. Often the information on reentry is framed negatively. Students are shown or told about the negative experiences or “symptoms” they

might have upon their return, but rarely do any of these resources “enable [returnees] to create actionable strategies to effectively cope with reentry challenges” (Brubaker, 2017, p.110). Additionally, as Brubaker (2017) points out, the resources typically use Gullahorn’s and Gullahorn’s “W-curve of Cultural Adjustment” from 1963. Much has changed since 1963, especially with the use of technology and how easy it is to connect with family and friends while traveling and to stay connected with friends from abroad after a student returns home. While this paper will not get into the details of the changes in the way the world communicates, it is an important variable to remember.

Other universities and organizations have begun conducting study abroad returnee conferences, some of which are free of charge to students and others charge a nominal fee; however, conferences have been mostly in-person, so the cost of travel and accommodations could easily deter students from attending, although a few have implemented virtual sessions, open to anyone, for 2020 and 2021. Conferences, such as Evolve: The Study Abroad Returnee Conference, Lessons from Abroad, ROC Your Global Future, and public discussion sessions like those put on by the Boston Area Study Abroad Association have similar topics, sessions, and opportunities for students to connect with other returnees. Research is all but non-existent on how these forums or programs benefit students, but it is reasonable to assume, based on the literature, that any amount of support or opportunities for engagement is valuable for returnees. Unfortunately, for many universities and their returnees, there is not enough capital to devote to returnee programming. Time and money are typically spent on advising and preparing students for their sojourn, and when events are planned for returnees, the turnout is often very low, which is another challenge in itself (Brubaker, 2017).

Self-Censoring and The Importance of Communication Upon Reentry

Communication plays a key role in the way students work through culture shock and reverse culture shock. While abroad, students are continuously learning how to communicate with those in the host culture, more so in cultures where the host language is not English, but even when the host language is English, students are still learning different vernacular and social cues. Then students need to relearn or remember the vernacular and social cues of the United States when they return. Communication after a sojourn, especially with close family and friends, is crucial for easing the challenges of reverse culture shock (Koester, 1983). Kim (2001) describes this process as “a monumental and lifelong task” to continuously recognize the codes and rules of communication while abroad (p.104), but it is important to consider this process is also needed at home upon return. Students who assimilated well into the host culture might not realize how their style of communication has changed and is now different from the norms of communication at home. Communication is a major tool for students to use when trying to make sense of their experiences and readjust to life back home (Fanari, Liu, Foerster, 2021), so if students are unable to communicate effectively it could negatively affect their return experience (Martin, 1986) and exacerbate their reverse culture shock.

In a study conducted by Kortegast & Boisfontaine (2015), students who returned from a study abroad sojourn were unlikely to talk about their study abroad experiences unless specifically asked about them, which did not happen often. Students found that they could not just share their experiences without being directly asked about them or without their experiences relating directly to the situation at hand. Students wanted to be asked more about their experiences, but it just did not happen. When students were asked about their experiences, the questions were related to tangible or factual information, never about how students were feeling

or what they were thinking (Kortegast & Boisfontaine, 2015), and the conversations for students in a different study were described as superficial and like others either did not care or were annoyed by the returnee (Fanari et al., 2021). There was an internal communication negotiation happening for these students, and they were continually negotiating with themselves when they should share something and when they should keep quiet, usually deciding to just keep quiet.

The time spent apart from family and friends back home sometimes left a gap in the relationships, which made communicating difficult for the returnee as their different experiences during that time apart were not relatable, and students would resort to “mindful communication” (Fanari et al., 2021, p.289). Instead of students sharing their stories and experiences how they wanted to, they would often tailor the narrative relative to the listener, while trying to watch for cues if the listener was bored or no longer interested, which was also exhausting for the returnee and led to them speaking less and less about their experiences (Fanari et al., 2021). In essence, the returnees were self-censoring their narratives. Self-censoring is an intentional act by someone who chooses not to share or express something, even if it is relevant to the situation or topic at hand, and it can sometimes be referred to as self-restraint, although the motives behind it are important for distinguishing between self-censorship and self-restraint (Horton, 2011). In the Fanari et al. study, returnees were self-censoring in order to accommodate what they believed others wanted to hear (highlights and positive experiences only), and this led to the students not freely communicating in the way they wanted to or just not communicating at all. Self-censorship with regard to returnees talking about their study abroad experiences can have many motives, such as: not wanting to feel like a braggart, not wanting others to feel bad, or trying to avoid ridicule for talking about study abroad too much.

Students also showed signs of self-censoring in the Fanari et al. study (2021) because the study abroad experience is too difficult to summarize in a sentence or two, which is usually the extent of what most people want to hear when they ask a returnee about their sojourn. The easiest people to speak with about study abroad experiences and returning are those who have done it before or those in the same program as the students (Fanari et al., 2021), which is not a surprising result of that particular study as they are the only people who could truly understand what a student is experiencing. When students are abroad, they use “everyday talk” with their study abroad peers as a way to work through the experience of culture shock and the challenges of integrating into the host culture (Pitts, 2009). The study by Pitts in 2009 supports a different study by Constantine et al. (2005), which found international students from the African continent studying in the U.S. also relied heavily on communication with their social networks, friends also studying in the U.S., when experiencing challenges with adjustment. Both of those studies focused on students while they were abroad, but why would communication with peers be any more or less important for U.S. university students returning from a sojourn and dealing with the reverse shock and challenges upon their return?

For some students who studied in a non-English speaking country and actively spoke the host country’s native language on a regular basis, they might find themselves rejecting the English language upon their return or developing some confusion between the two languages, making communication difficult initially; however, this fades and students fully return to speaking English (Fanari et al., 2021). For those who reject speaking English upon their return, this might be a way for them to hold on to the study abroad experience or a sign they are denial their program ended. This could be part of the grieving process of emotional distance that Fray identified (1988). Students may also unknowingly pick up different communication styles, such

as standing in closer proximity to others when speaking to them, so after returning home they may continue some of these new forms of communication, possibly offending others until they revert (Niesen, 2010). Communication is a key component of working through reverse culture shock, and being able to share both the positives and negatives of a sojourn could help students tremendously, as long as they are willing to communicate, and their support networks are willing to listen. In the study conducted by Niesen (2010), they found that out of multiple factors to consider regarding the easing of reentry, only one was statistically significant: social support.

Interpersonal relationships, specifically with family and friends, are the most necessary factor when participants return from study abroad. Talking about experiences and having available outlets such as family and friends are especially important to make sense of the experience to incorporate the experience into their lives in the United States. (p. 97)

Finally, finding a way to educate those support networks about the student reentry experience is also important so that they will have a basic understanding or some expectations of how the returnee might have changed and how they can better communicate with the returnee upon reentry, e.g., not continually pointing out all of the ways in which the returnee is now “different” from before.

Being an American University Student Abroad

For those students who have changed significantly, or at least feel that they have, especially with regard to their thoughts on American and being an American, it can be difficult for them to speak negatively about the U.S. to others who did not have a similar experience that challenged the way they view the United States or feel as an American. Students might not fully understand why their sentiments about the United States have changed or the full extent of the change, and sharing a very personal change can be difficult because they are either unsure how

to express it or fear they will be judged or misunderstood (Martin, 1986). It seems obvious that spending time in a country outside of the United States would expose students to a non-American-centric attitude, but studying abroad might be a student's first time encountering a this.

It is common to hear that Americans abroad are strongly disliked, and often described as loud, obnoxious, entitled, and/or culturally clueless. In 1958, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer coined the phrase, "the ugly American" in their fiction-but-based-on-facts novel regarding the perception of Americans in Southeast Asia and how they continuously failed to understand the differences between the cultures of the various Southeast Asian countries and the American culture. In the novel, their lack of ability or willingness to assimilate or understand the different cultures, even just a little bit, resulted in failed diplomacy efforts (Tréguer, 2019). This concept of "the ugly American" is often shared with study abroad students during pre-departure orientations. Students are told to research the history of their host country and current issues of the country, as well as common phrases in the native language (if it is a non-English speaking country and if the students are not already studying the language). Students are further advised against congregating in large groups of other Americans, giving the appearance of unwillingness to assimilate with the host country and local culture, and they are warned against being too loud, especially in public places such as restaurants and public transportation.

These warnings and preparations can give a student concern that they will be strongly disliked as an American while abroad or even treated poorly because of their nationality. According to Pew Research (2018) and US News (2020), the students' concerns and those of the study abroad administrators advising students during pre-departure orientations, are not unfounded. Americans are still looked upon unfavorably, as a whole, and the global opinion of

the United States is at historic lows (Wike et al., 2018; US News, 2020). That being said, the American culture is so pervasive globally, and in my own experiences traveling and living outside of the United States, I have found people tend to be very friendly when they learn or realize I am American, and they want to know all about the United States. Or people want to talk about politics, very openly discussing whether or not they like whoever the President is at that time. Students who participated in a study with Nancy Dolby (2004) specifically noted how pervasive the American culture and brands were in Australia during a study abroad sojourn, immediately recognizing multiple American brands and tv-shows upon arrival.² These same students were then later criticized on multiple occasions for being American but not knowing enough about their own country and government, let alone Australia and its government (Dolby, 2004). This criticism led these students in particular to sometimes feel the need to defend their Americanism and other times question it, American policies, and the concept that the American way is the “right” way (Dolby, 2004).

The education system in the United States is very America-centric, thereby educating generations of students to have an understanding of the United States, but not necessarily much understanding of the rest of the world. The U.S. education system leads students to have a very ethnocentric viewpoint, where one prefers their own native culture or nationality, believing it be superior to all others, also known as “American Exceptionalism” (Hauhart & Birkenstein, 2015). The education system also participates in “invented traditions” which further develop this ethnocentrism, such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, displaying the American flag, and singing the national anthem at events (Dolby, 2004, p.156). Studying abroad tends to lessen this

² This study was published in 2004, but the students were interviewed in 2001 and 2002. It is possible that the prevalence of American brands and tv shows in Australia has since then changed. It is also important to note that Dolby recognizes these interviews took place shortly after 9/11, and the America-centric view of some students could have easily been influenced by the events from that day.

ethnocentrism by interacting with people from different cultures, inside and outside of education (DiFrancesco et al., 2019). Students who are less ethnocentric from the start tend to have more realistic expectations of their study abroad experience as they have a better understanding regarding the prevalence of other cultures outside of their own (Goldstein & Kim, 2005), but maybe these same students have a more difficult experience with reverse culture shock upon their return as they can see the value of other cultures and can better assimilate within their host country. As discussed previously, students who embrace the host culture and assimilate easily tend to have a more difficult time returning to the United States, and using a measure of ethnocentrism when selecting students for studying abroad could provide the opportunity for “early interventions” to help those less ethnocentric students have a more successful return experience (Barbuto et al., 2015).

It is possible and likely that those highly ethnocentric students are not studying abroad. Directly asking students questions to discern their level of ethnocentrism is not appropriate and likely not socially acceptable. In a comparative study by Savicki and Cooley (2011), 59 study abroad students were compared to 49 students who did not study abroad. They found that American students who did not participate in a study abroad program had higher levels of commitment to their American identities with lower desire to explore their American identities than the study abroad participants. The study abroad students showed a “more balanced commitment and exploration” to their American identities prior to their sojourn, and later showed lower commitment and higher exploration numbers than their non-study abroad peers. This is indicative of a person who is actively processing and reflecting on their identity. Savicki and Cooley (2011) end the conclusion of the study by saying, “Because of its disruptive effects, study abroad can act as a catalyst for reexamination and refinement of psychological identity”

(p.348). The traditional college-aged study abroad students, who are already in a phase of reflecting upon their identities and impressionable, could be easily influenced by other cultures, leading to an easier time assimilating to the host culture and a more difficult time returning. Study abroad practitioners and university counselors should ask themselves if they believe students are prepared to handle the “disruptive effects” on “psychological identity” that studying abroad will have on their students.

While some students might have an ethnocentric approach, most are not well-versed on American politics or policies, topics that citizens of their host countries are often well-versed in themselves. It is not uncommon for citizens of a country outside of the United States to want to engage in conversations about American politics, and students can find themselves in tense situations without the key knowledge or vocabulary to have a meaningful conversation (NAFSA, 2003; Shenkman, 2008). American politics and policies are discussed on the news heavily in the United States, but also heavily in much of the world. So, it is easy to criticize Americans for not knowing enough about the rest of the world, but at the same time it is a challenging balance, especially for university-aged students, when the rest of the world focuses so much on the United States. The soft power of the United States, with regard to its attractive culture, has an influence on higher education (Nye, 2005) and possibly the experiences of American students who choose to study abroad.

Studying abroad is not just an experience to learn about other cultures though, it is also a time for students to see the United States from the outside looking in (NAFSA, 2003). It is a time for students to understand how other countries and cultures view the United States and how U.S. policies and decisions affect people on a global level. It is a time for students to be challenged by viewpoints that are significantly different from their own, especially those students who tend

to lean toward a more ethnocentric viewpoint. Finally, it is a time for students to look within themselves and learn things about themselves that they may not ever have had the chance to learn studying solely at a university in the United States. A Dolby (2004) eloquently stated:

Thus, the perspectives that students bring back with them are part of public discourse in the United States and have implications for the future of American democracy, the public good, and the constant renegotiation of the material and imaginative space that is America. (p. 173)

Students should not be left alone to recognize or know how to manage and integrate these new viewpoints about themselves or their nation, the United States. Again, students need resources and support when it comes to returning home and working through the ways in which they have changed, especially if they were not expecting to change in the way they did.

Summary Gap

There is a gap in the literature in how students prepare themselves for their return home, if they prepare themselves at all, and whether having an expectation of reverse culture shock made the experience more recognizable. There is also a lack of information explaining how students work through the re-acclimation process upon their return from a sojourn, even though researchers have found that reverse culture shock can be more challenging than the initial entry into a foreign culture (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Furnham, 2012). The gap in the literature regarding the way students navigate the challenges of reverse culture shock, their expectations of it, their communication around it, and how students re-enter into the life they left behind is driving this study. This gap must be studied more extensively so that international higher education administrators and study abroad professionals can better prepare students for their return and then assist or advise students who struggle with the re-assimilation process. Cultural

understanding, growth and maturity are all positive outcomes of reverse culture shock, so it is not the goal to eliminate the experience of reverse culture shock, but rather to make the experience of re-entry more recognizable to students. In making it more recognizable, students may have a better understanding of their experiences after returning home and why they might be struggling with their return and therefore, the students can seek guidance or support, if they choose to do so, in order to process their experiences and hopefully make life-lasting gains from it.

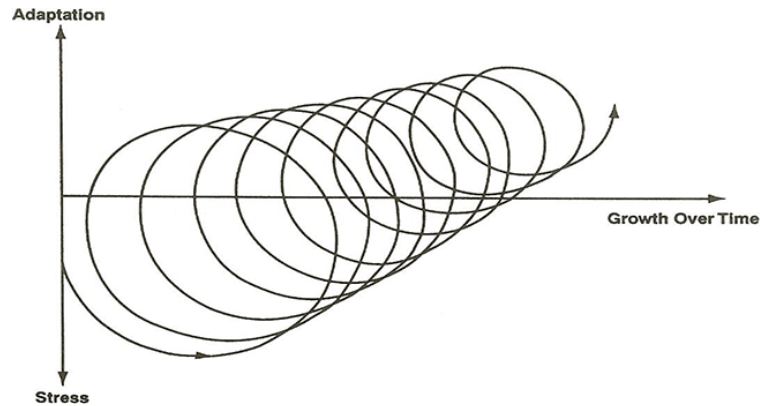
Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks are driving this study: the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (ITCCA) (Kim, 2001) and the Expectations Model, which was first introduced as the role of met expectations by Porter & Steers (1973) but was later used in a global and cultural adjustment context by Black & Gregersen (1990) and Black (1992). Both ITCCA and the Expectations Model are important to use and consider when studying culture shock and reverse culture shock as they offer flexible stages which students can move into and out of fluidly, meaning they do not need to complete one stage before moving on to the next. Additionally, the two models define the emotional experiences of those who have participated in a study abroad experience, giving students and study abroad administrators the ability to identify the emotions and speak about them more easily. The ITCCA model is an appropriate framework as it shows sojourners experiencing a variety of emotions and cycling through them at various times and repeating some emotions over and over again. The Expectations Model is also an appropriate framework as it discusses how knowledge and expectations of returning home affect how a person manages the re-entry experience. If one expects the process to be difficult, the transition is often easier since they were “prepared” for

challenges of the experience, and at a minimum the students can remind themselves throughout the challenges that they are a normal expectation of the re-entry experience. Study abroad practitioners can revert back to the Expectations Model when discussing re-entry challenges with students, and university counseling teams could also reference this information when working with students who recently returned from a study abroad experience.

Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Y.Y. Kim introduced the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (ITCCA) in 2001 in order to elevate their previous Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation (1988). ITCCA builds on the Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, which when introduced gave a more accurate depiction of a student's cultural growth experience since the theory was described as continually moving and not a single, linear process like the U-Curve or W-curve, mentioned previously. Cross-cultural adaptation defined the way in which travelers adapted to a new culture, how that adaptation took place, and it defined a process of experiencing a stressful event or situation, adapting to the stress, then growing in a way that better prepares a person for managing a similar stressful event or situation in the future. This process is continually occurring and is cyclical in nature, so it is also referred to as a "draw-back-to-leap pattern" which is depicted in Figure 2.3 (Kim, 2017). Adaptation is "the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, through direct and indirect contacts with an unfamiliar environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (Kim, 2008, p.363).

Figure 2. 3*Cultural Spiral of Adjustment* (Kim, 2001)

ITCCA refines the theory of cross-cultural adaptation by introducing the important concept of communication and the ways in which various forms of communication influence sojourners and affect their levels of stress and the time it takes to integrate, or in the case of reentry, the time it takes to re-integrate. Kim (2001) developed ITCCA to describe the process by which sojourners experience a new culture or place and use means of communication to process their experiences around assimilation and acculturation. Kim (2001) briefly mentions applying the theory to sojourners who return home, but it is quickly dismissed (a common theme among those who write about culture shock) as an experience that is “less demanding and prolonged process than adapting for a foreign culture” (p.33). However, Martin & Harrel (2004) and Pitts (2016) flipped the premise of ITCCA and did apply it to sojourners experiencing reentry to their previous home environments.

The Expectations Model

The Expectations Model approach is often used in the research on reverse culture shock or re-entry experiences but not specifically related to university study abroad students (Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Szkudlarek, 2010). The basis of the Expectations Model conveys that preparation leads to better outcomes (Szkudlarek, 2010). In the context of reverse culture shock, properly preparing students for the experience of reverse culture shock will result in students handling the phenomenon with lower levels of stress than those who were not prepared. Taking note of how students were prepared and how much of that preparation students recalled prior to their return will be important in determining how the preparation affected their re-entry experience.

The Expectations Model was used and validated in a study on the spouses of U.S. Foreign Service members (Maybarduk, 2008; Szkudlarek, 2010). The spouses who did not have any expectations for experiencing reverse culture shock had a more challenges readjusting to life back in the United States (Maybarduk, 2008). The less preparation provided to returnees prior to their actual return, the more stress and difficulties those returnees will experience after the return (Black et al., 1992; Chamove and Soeterik, 2006). While it is important to support returnees after the sojourn, it is imperative that returnees be prepared for the reentry experience prior to their return in order to facilitate an easier transition for them upon their return. As the Expectations Model indicates, the more prepared a person is prior to the return, the easier transition they will have.

In summary, Y.Y. Kim's (2001) ITCCA has been used as a model to describe the way in which people use many different forms of communication, both verbal and nonverbal, to adapt to new cultural situations during a sojourn, but in this study, it will be tested as an explanation for

the process by which recent study abroad returnees communicate about and navigate reverse culture shock upon returning home after the sojourn. ITCCA should more broadly include the process of re-adaptation through reverse culture shock. The Expectations Model will be utilized to frame research questions and questions asked of the university study abroad returnees regarding their expectations of returning home and reverse culture shock; if they feel their expectations were accurate; and if they feel they could have been better prepared for their re-entry.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodological approach used for this study. First, research questions will be shared, which were developed using information from the literature review and the two chosen frameworks for this study: the Expectations Model and Kim's 2001 Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (ITCCA). Next, information will be presented regarding the sample population for the study and how that sample was identified, followed by summaries for data collection and analysis. Finally, I will provide my positionality statement, a discussion of the data's validity and reliability, and the limitations of this study. This study was approved by the University of Arizona Internal Review Board (IRB) in October 2022.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to lessen the gap in research on reverse culture shock as it relates to students' experiences after returning from a semester or longer abroad. The goal of this study was to gather information regarding students' experiences and how they navigated the phenomenon of reverse culture shock in order to inform study abroad professionals so they can create better ways to support students prior to their return and after. The primary research questions for this study were:

1. How did study abroad returnees envision their re-entry experience prior to re-entry? Did they prepare for it at all?
 - a. What information or experience(s) led them to have those expectations? Pre-departure orientations? Pre-return meetings? Other?
 - b. To what extent did returning students experience expectation gaps and/or expectation overlaps upon re-entry?

2. How do study abroad returnees make meaning of their study abroad experience and their return home while reintegrating into their home culture?
 - a. To what extent do study abroad returnees experience and navigate reverse culture shock?
 - b. How do students communicate about their study abroad and return home experiences post-sojourn? Are these communication tactics helpful?

The first main research question and sub questions are related to the Expectations Model theory. I asked students questions regarding the way they envisioned their re-entry versus the way it actually happened. I asked if their expectations were met in a positive or negative way, or both. It is important to learn about the expectations the students had and how their experiences matched them in order to inform the model. Additionally, I asked questions regarding their previous travel experiences, if they traveled often while growing up, or if they had ever spent time abroad before. Understanding students' past experiences with traveling, especially traveling abroad, was particularly important when it came time to ask students about their experiences with reverse culture shock.

The second main question and sub-questions relate to the Cultural Spiral of Adjustment and the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation. I want to understand if students felt they grew and changed not only during the study abroad experience itself but also during the re-entry experiences. Do they still consider themselves to be growing and changing from the re-entry experience? It was important to learn whether or not students felt they experienced reverse culture shock themselves, how they managed the feelings of RCS, and how they feel they grew from it.

Research Approach

In this study, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interviews with study abroad returnees who studied abroad a semester or longer between Spring 2021 and Spring 2022. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask a set of pre-prepared questions of the students, while giving me some freedom to deviate from the questions to garner a deeper understanding of the students' responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This also allowed me to alter the phrasing of questions slightly when students did not understand the questions or if they responded in a way that led to the need to ask follow-up questions. There is research available regarding reverse culture shock, but I do not believe there is enough research that has targeted exactly how students feel about their own experiences and what helped them through reverse culture shock.

The qualitative interview approach was the best way to gain information for this study. Speaking to the researcher (me) gives the participants a chance to work through their thoughts aloud. The original intention was to interview two different sets of students, preferably from the same home university: those who returned between ten and fifteen months ago and those who returned within the last three to five months. However, due to lower numbers of students studying abroad over the last two years due to Covid-19 restrictions and protocols, and the challenge to garner enough participants for the study, I interviewed any student who was interested in participating in the study. This also meant that the interview participants were not from the same home university, which is discussed in the following section, so I did not review any pre-departure materials or orientation slides provided to students since the pre-departure information was different from student to student. As previously shared, most of the students had studied abroad for a semester, and a few studied abroad for a year.

When interviewing students, I tried to focus minimally on their overall experience abroad, and instead focused on their expectations of returning home prior to reentry, their initial experiences upon returning home and back to university (if applicable), and if they had the opportunity to attend any returnee meetings. I also asked them questions related to their preparations for returning home and what those preparations looked like.

I focused more on how the returnees are feeling now with their reintegration back home, if their expectations for returning home were met or not, highlights of their return versus low points, and how they feel they have grown since their return. Without leading the students, I also asked how they self-identify now versus how they self-identified prior to the sojourn, followed by questions regarding how and/or why studying abroad changed them, which all provided relevant information regarding the growth students experienced. It was important to see if students attribute any stress or challenges to that growth, which relates back to Kim's ITCCA.

I also asked all students if they recall receiving any information regarding reverse culture shock during their pre-departure orientation or within the materials they were required to review prior to their sojourn, upon arrival in their host country, and/or prior to their return. Research participants were from a variety of different universities, so the information they received and the way in which they received it varied greatly. It was important to ascertain what information students recalled receiving regarding reverse culture shock in order to frame interview questions around what they remember and how that remember that information being provided to them. If students did not receive information or do not recall receiving any information, I asked them what they think might have been useful to receive prior to returning home and when. Asking students to recall information from their pre-departure or pre-return materials was directly related to the Expectations Model and the first research question.

Research Sample

All students interviewed were citizens of the United States of America. Due to the challenge of recruiting enough participants from one university, as I had hoped to do, I contacted colleagues from several different universities in the United States to recruit students. Students were recruited from private and public universities, with the following regional breakdown: Southwest universities, 5 students; West Coast universities, 2 students; East Coast universities, 8 students; and Midwest universities, 15 students. These numbers represent the number of students from universities in those regions, not necessarily where the students are from. For example, one student attended a university in the Southwest; however, the student is from Illinois (Midwest). Please see the table below for the breakdown of study abroad location and semester(s) spent abroad, including the national percentage of students who studied abroad in that country during the 2018/19 academic year, according to IIE (2020), compared to the percentage of students who chose that location in this study.

Table 3. 1 *Study Abroad Location and Time Period Abroad*

Country	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Acad. Year 2021/22	Cal. Year 2021	Cal. Year 2022	Totals	2018/19 Percentage	Percentage in study
France		1				1	5.3	3.3
Germany		1	4			5	3.5	16.7
Italy		2				2	11.2	6.7
Mexico		2				2	1.8	6.7
South Korea				1		1	1.3	3.3
Spain	1	6				7	9.8	23.3
Sweden		2				2	.55	6.7
Uganda		1				1	.23	3.3
United Kingdom		6	1		1	8	11.3	26.7
Uruguay		1				1	.06	3.3
Totals	1	22	5	1	1	30		

Of the 30 students interviewed, approximately 73.3% of participants identified racially as white, 13.3% identified racially as black, 6.7% as Latinx, 3.3% as Asian (1 student), and 3.3% as Jewish (1 student). The student who identified as Jewish specifically stated that they identify as “Jewish in every sense, including religiously, ethnically, and culturally” (Rylan). All interview participants are citizens of the United States, but several students listed a cultural heritage as part of their core identity in addition to being American, or in some cases, dual-citizenship, and those locations included: Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, and Scandinavia.

Data Collection

Data was collected during interviews conducted over Zoom due to my physical location outside of the United States, and each interview was approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by Zoom, after which I reviewed the transcriptions for clarity and accuracy. Students were aware the interview was being recorded, and they were advised on the informed consent form and reminded twice during the interview, the beginning and the end, that the call was being recorded. However, I did explicitly say that the interviews would not be heard or seen by anyone other than me. During the interviews, I asked questions to determine how much the students remembered about the reverse culture shock information they received (if at all) prior to the sojourn or during the sojourn; how they navigated their return experience; whether or not they recognized any of their post-return experiences as reverse culture shock; and how their perceptions as Americans influenced their experiences abroad and upon returning home. For most interview participants, I did not have to explain the concept of reverse culture shock, as many were familiar with the term, and learned about it at some point either just prior to the sojourn or during it. There were a few students who had not heard of the term “reverse

culture shock” until they received the recruitment email, sent on my behalf, with “reverse culture shock” in the subject line.

It was important for me to build rapport very quickly during the interviews since I was only interviewing each student once and because good rapport should have led students to communicate more openly about their experiences (Seidman, 2013). I asked questions regarding how the participants felt they changed, if at all, during their study abroad experience, if they identify themselves any differently now, and how those changes effected the way they felt about returning to the United States and themselves as American. I asked about their nationality and ethnicity and if they felt those parts of their identity shaped their study abroad experience and their re-entry at all. It was informative to learn how students’ experiences were affected since they are American, how students recognized aspects of their American privilege during their time abroad, and if they carried those experiences home.

There were also questions regarding their thoughts, anticipations, and expectations prior to returning home. I asked questions about the students’ knowledge of reverse culture shock, what they think it means, and if they believe they experienced it. There were questions regarding their prior knowledge of the phenomenon and if they felt they had been prepared for some of the challenges of reverse culture shock, if they experienced any. Finally, there were additional questions related to preparedness for reverse culture shock, if they believe they were adequately prepared or if there is anything additional that could have been done to prepare them for it, and what they might tell someone else who is preparing to return home.

Throughout the interviews, I was interviewing the students using a retrospective approach. Some students had returned only a few months prior to the interview, others had returned almost a year prior. While it is possible students remember exactly how they felt and

what their experiences were like, it needs to be considered that their memories could have eroded over time and what they recall experiencing differs slightly from their actual experiences.

Students may have either omitted some of the truth or embellished it slightly to make it seem more significant. The retrospective approach has its advantages, such as allowing participants to think back to their experiences and make meaning of them as they are sharing what they recall, or they could more accurately articulate their experiences as they have had more time to reflect on them.

Research Site Location

All interviews were conducted via Zoom due to my physical location in South Africa. Additionally, the student participants were living in a variety of locations in the United States, and some were visiting family or friends overseas, so conducting interviews in-person was not possible. I expected this to present a challenge when trying to build rapport with the students, but I was reminded multiple times by many students that the majority of their university experiences up until their time abroad had been virtual due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The majority of the interview participants had only one full semester at university, during their freshman year, before universities switched to full-virtual learning in early 2020.

Participants

It was particularly challenging to secure enough students for this study. In the end, 34 students responded to my recruitment message, and 30 of those students followed through with the interview. Colleagues in the field of study abroad at various universities sent my recruitment message to their study abroad returnees who had studied abroad for a semester or longer between Spring 2021 and Spring 2022. The recruitment message went to 1034 students, with the end result being 30 interviewees. As Table 3.1 shows, the majority of interviewees studied abroad

for one semester, during Spring 2022. The United Kingdom and Spain were the top two destinations for the interviewees, which is not surprising as the UK and Spain are often in the top three locations for U.S. university students studying abroad (IIE 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022). It is important to note the impact of Covid-19 on study abroad in general. Almost all students who were abroad in the Spring 2020 semester (northern hemisphere, January – May) had to return home prior to the end of their study abroad program due to Covid-19 lockdowns around the world. None of these students were contacted or interviewed.

I chose not to contact the study abroad students from 2020 because I wanted to interview students whose programs were less likely to be significantly impacted or cut short due to Covid-19 as this might have skewed some of the results regarding the experiences of reverse culture shock. A student who had to return home unexpectedly, without the chance to “prepare” to return home, possibly had a different type of reverse culture shock experience than those who had a “normal” study abroad program and were able to prepare themselves for their return prior to leaving the study abroad country. Study abroad participation mostly began again in the Spring 2021 semester, although the number of study abroad participants from the United States was still much lower than the numbers prior to the onset of Covid-19. In the 2018/19 academic year, 347,099 undergraduate students in the United States participated in a study abroad program for academic credit (IIE, 2020), which is approximately 2% of the total undergraduate population in the U.S. The 2019/20 academic year saw a decline of 53% from the previous year in study abroad participation to 162,633 students (IIE, 2021) because there were not any short-term study abroad programs taking place during the summer months of the northern hemisphere. The 2020/21 academic year saw a 91% decline from the previous year, down to 14,549 students (IIE, 2022).

Recruitment and Informed Consent

Students were recruited via emails sent on my behalf from current and former colleagues. Students who met the criteria received the email from their home university or their study abroad program. The email specifically requested that students contact me directly via email or text if they were interested in participating in the study. Upon confirmation of an interview date and time, I sent students an informed consent form via Adobe Sign. I asked all of the students to review the information carefully, then sign it before meeting with me. During the interviews, I asked students if they had any questions regarding the form or for me prior to starting the interviews.

Data Analysis

Due to the number of interviews, I used a continuous data analysis method to determine if and when interview questions needed adjusting or rephrasing, a process recommended by Corbin & Strauss (2015). During the first few interviews, I noticed that some students did not have a clear understanding of the meaning of reverse culture shock, so at the appropriate time, I added a short definition of reverse culture shock into the question asking students if they experienced it or not. I also found it important to specifically ask students how long it took for them to reach a sense of normalcy after returning home, which was a question I did not ask in the first few interviews, as I realized that interview participants were not sharing that information on their own without being asked directly. I took copious amounts of notes during the interviews when I needed to follow-up with a participant on an answer they gave or when I realized a common theme was appearing and I wanted to glean more information.

I used in vivo coding, values coding, and structural coding based on Saldana's coding manual (2016). I coded for all themes simultaneously, but I also reviewed the data a second time

in order to determine if anything was missed or should have been coded differently. Some in vivo codes included unexplainable, sad, bittersweet, grateful, and disconnect. These words were some of the most used when I asked participants how they felt about their study abroad experiences, from living and studying abroad to their return home, so it only made sense to use in vivo coding for a substantial portion of the coding process. Values codes included challenges (with regarding to returning home), viewing nationality now compared to before, differences between American and other countries, and new attitudes/beliefs. Values codes were important to use because participants would sometimes describe the same sentiment or a similar experience without using the same words as other participants; however, the overall theme or “value” was the same. Structural codes included growth from study abroad, prior reverse culture shock knowledge (which had many subcodes), returning home (also multiple subcodes), and sharing experiences. Structural coding has been the most valuable with regard to the research questions and analyzing the information shared throughout the interviews as they relate to the research questions of this study. There was some overlap between all three types of coding, which was expected since the interview participants used words that I coded directly (in vivo) which also related to their world views, attitudes, and beliefs, especially new feels they gained during and after studying abroad (values), and each of these types of coding aligned with most the research questions (structural), so it was only natural that simultaneous coding occurred throughout this process.

I was able to tie the coding back to the frameworks used in this study: the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (ITCCA) and the Expectations Model, both of which were discussed in Chapter Two. Both models rely on attitudes and beliefs of participants, which relate to values coding, and since these frameworks informed the research

questions, the structural coding process ties in with the models as well. I was able to group many of the codes into an expectations theme, as well a variety of codes were grouped into themes related to adaptation and communication. Grouping the codes into themes related to the two frameworks provided me with the ability to analyze participant responses more effectively. There were codes and themes that were positive and negative regarding expectations participants had (or did not have), how that affected their experiences, and how nationality played a role in their abilities to adapt both abroad and upon their return home, including the ways in which they communicated about those experiences upon their return.

Data and Analytical Integrity

Throughout the interviews, I was careful to keep information about my own personal experiences quiet until the end of the interview, and even then, I only shared my experience with interviewees if they specifically asked where I studied abroad, when I studied abroad, and/or if I experienced reverse culture shock myself. I know that my own experiences could have influenced the way I interacted with certain participants in my study. When some participants began sharing personal challenges with reverse culture shock that were similar to my own past experiences, I strived to keep my reactions neutral, while still trying to garner more information. It was also possible that the experiences were not that similar, even though the experiences the interviewee was describing sounded similar to mine. It was important to keep my reactions to those students the same as my reactions to students who claimed to not have any struggles as a study abroad returnee. Maxwell (2013) discusses the concept of reactivity as a specific threat to validity, and he shares that “reactivity” is a critique of qualitative studies.

Reactivity, my influence on the participants in the study during interviews, was practically unavoidable. However, as Maxwell (2013) points out, avoiding “leading questions”

and understanding how I am “influencing what the [participant] says and how this affects the validity of the inferences [I] draw from the interview” are two important steps to take in order to minimize reactivity and my influence on the process, which I actively practiced (p.125).

Additionally, I kept a journal of my own feelings and attitudes during the interview and analysis processes, as Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommend, in order to search for any biases or assumptions that I may have made during these processes. Given my own experience with the challenges of reverse culture shock, I tried to conduct interviews with a lens that prevented me from getting too involved with the emotional aspects of the interview. Corbin and Strauss stress that a researcher must be careful not to get too emotionally involved with the participants of a study in order to “think clearly and analytically about what is being said or done” (2015, p.98). As a study abroad returnee, a former study abroad advisor, and a professional in the administrative field of international higher education, it was important for me to maintain a neutral approach when interviewing the participants and not try to help them sort through their reentry process or the reverse culture shock they are or were experiencing. I could have jeopardized the study by becoming involved and helping students sort through their experiences. Although, I was prepared to act if at any time I felt that a student was a danger to themselves or others. Thankfully, no students expressed sentiments that led me to believe they were at risk.

While at first it seemed that my ability to find enough participants who were willing to speak with me via Zoom for 90 – 120 minutes would be a limitation, it actually proved to be an asset. Approximately 1034 students received the recruitment email, but I was only able to schedule 30 interviews. Thirty-four students had contacted me about the interview, but only 30 confirmed (2.9% of those contacted). The goal was to interview at least 25 students, preferably from the same university as they will have experienced the same or similar orientations and

communication prior to and during their sojourns. Unfortunately, after only receiving five interview requests from my initial chosen university, located in the southwest, I decided to contact other study abroad colleagues for support. Even though I believe I found enough participants for the study, I was concerned the results would be skewed toward those who were eager to discuss their experiences, therefore not providing a representative enough sample from which to draw conclusions for the study that could later be applied to all study abroad returnees across the United States.

However, for the purposes of this research, saturation within the data was achieved. During the interview process, similar themes were continuously emerging, and the same or similar codes were being utilized to analyze the data. In other words, interview participants were consistently stating they experienced reverse culture shock to some degree and would have preferred having more information about the phenomenon in order to better understand the concept and prepare themselves. So, while it could be viewed as a limitation that only 30 participants were interviewed, saturation of the data proves otherwise and is viewed as providing validity to this study. There is a self-selection bias that should be considered with regard to saturation, where only those participants who experienced reverse culture shock were willing to speak about it, even though a couple of participants believed they did not experience it. Self-selection bias could also be viewed as a limitation; however, the mere fact that most participants did experience reverse culture shock, even if that was the only reason why they participated in the study, adds to the saturation and validity of the study, and it further means study abroad practitioners must consider students' experiences and how they can better support students.

Positionality

My own experiences as a study abroad returnee influenced this study and are a personal motivator for studying this topic. I also recognized that my experiences and this personal motivation are and were a potential threat to the validity of this study; however, my experiences also gave me a unique insight into participants' experiences and the questions to ask them in order to build rapport (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007). I studied abroad in spring of 2007 for approximately six months. Upon my return home, I very quickly began to experience re-entry or reverse culture shock, and I was not prepared to navigate some particularly challenging situations. I do recall receiving information about reverse culture shock during my pre-departure orientation during the fall of 2006, but I did not connect the reverse culture shock information to my own experiences of reverse culture shock until I became a study abroad advisor five years later.

I attended all of the returnee events at my alma mater and even began volunteering as a peer advisor in the study abroad office, but I never sought help or guidance from anyone regarding my experiences. I was also unsure how to speak about my experiences with my friends who had studied abroad with me, and I especially never felt that I could speak about my experiences with those friends who had not studied abroad at all. My experiences after studying abroad have directly influenced my desire to study reverse culture shock in study abroad returnees and how universities can better support those students.

Due to my experiences prior to this study, I have a strong suspicion that most students struggle with reverse culture shock, but they often have not been given the tools they need to expect it and work through it, or they are unable to recall the tools there were given. I suspect some may not even recognize their post-return challenges as reverse culture shock. It was

important for me to keep an open mind to the possibility that not all students experience a level of reverse culture shock that requires support services from the university, even though I do think all students could benefit from some preparation regarding what they might experience upon or shortly after their return from a study abroad program. During the interviews, I allowed students ample time to answer questions, even when that means staying silent after they have answered a question in case the students have more to add but were working through their own internal thoughts. I did not divulge details of my experience as a returnee unless students specifically asked about my experiences at the end of the interview when I gave them a chance to ask questions.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study, which will be addressed in this section. First, the study abroad locations for the students in this study do not closely correspond to the national average breakdown, according to IIE (2020). These percentages can be found in Table 3.1 above. While the main focus of this study was on reverse culture shock in general and not specific to certain study abroad locations, it would have been beneficial to have a more representative sample of study abroad locations.

The second limitation was the population of the study might have been too specific to make a strong impact in higher education, especially since many of the study participants studied abroad in the same or similar locations. Of the 30 students, 25 of them studied abroad in Europe (83.3%), which is not surprising given the popularity of European locations for U.S. study abroad students. The most recent OpenDoors report from the Institute for International Education (IIE) for the 2021-22 academic year shows that 66.3% of students studied in Europe (IIE, 2022). The other five students studied in the regions of Asia (1 student, 3.3%), Sub-Saharan

Africa (1 student, 3.3%), North America (2 students, 6.7%), and Latin America (1 student, 3.3%). Those same regions for the 2022 OpenDoors report are Asia 12.3%, Sub-Saharan Africa 2.4%, North America 0.2%), and Latin America (which includes the Caribbean) 11%.

The third limitation was the Zoom call interviews. While students were very familiar with using Zoom after spending two years completing courses online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I cannot confidently say that I was able to build rapport as well as I could have with an in-person interview. Therefore, students may not have been as forthcoming as they might have been in-person. That being said, considering that students were from all over the United States, and some even in Europe, during the time of the interview, it would not have been possible to conduct all interviews in-person. Conducting all of the interviews over Zoom then kept one factor consistent throughout the study.

Finally, the last limitation to consider is the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' experiences. Covid-19 and the need for immunizations, testing prior to and during travel, and mask mandates could have altered the experiences of those who studied abroad during 2021 and 2022 in a way that makes it difficult to apply their experiences to future study abroad participants who may not need immunizations, additional testing, or do not have to wear masks. There is a perception and biases limitation to consider, as well: my own study abroad experience and the difficulties I faced upon returning home. These experiences were discussed previously in the Positionality section above.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview of Findings

In this chapter, I will be addressing the research questions and the information I discovered while interviewing study abroad alumni for this study. I will first share what influenced students to study abroad and how they came to choose their specific locations. Next, I will answer the first research question relating to how students envisioned their re-entry process, how they prepared, if at all, why they had those expectations, and the reality of their experiences compared to their expectations – did their expectations of reverse culture shock become reality or was the reality of the situation different from those expectations. For research question two, I will address and provide examples to discuss how students make meaning of their study abroad experiences, experiences with reverse culture shock, and how they navigated the phenomenon and the strategies they used while integrating the changes in themselves from their time abroad to their former selves, prior to the sojourn. For some of the interview participants, I did need to define the term, reverse culture shock. Some did not realize what they had experienced was part of reverse culture shock and that it had a name. Furthermore, I will delve into how students communicate about their experiences with others, and why they often choose not to speak about their experiences at all. Pseudonyms have been used in place of interview participants' real names.

Studying Abroad to Improve Language Skills

Students' reasons for studying abroad mostly fell within three categories: to improve non-native language skills (for those going to non-English speaking countries), to immerse themselves in another culture, and the fear of regretting it later in life if they did not study abroad. Nearly 75% of those interviewed studied in a non-English speaking country, and the

majority of those students had studied the language prior to studying abroad, some more extensively than others. This percentage is consistent with the national percentage of U.S. students who study abroad in non-English speaking countries, which is 78.5%; however, that percentage includes programs of all lengths, and short-term study abroad programs rarely require students to have been studying the host country language prior to the sojourn. In the 2018/19 academic year, the most recent data available not skewed by the Covid-19 pandemic, 64.9% of study abroad students participated in a short-term program (summer, or eight weeks or less) (IIE, 2020). Those who did study the language of their host country prior to studying abroad described having a more immersive experience than those who did not study the language prior, which as this study will show had an effect on the re-entry process.

Studying abroad to improve language skills is probably the most popular reason U.S. study abroad students choose to study in a country where English is not the native language. Students often see this opportunity as a way to improve language skills, increase comfortability with a language, and progress to fluency. One participant, who had a mostly positive study abroad experience, even though they did not speak the native language of the host country, nor did they expect to struggle initially with the language as much as they did, stated:

I first went to [host country], and like before I even like, got on the flight or anything. I really thought that I was going to come home fluent in [host language]. I don't know why I thought that, but I was like, six months? It's gonna happen. (Riley)

But upon arrival, Riley quickly realized they would struggle with learning the language and becoming fluent was not going to happen. When asked what it was like to speak the host language and how communication happened with the host family in the beginning, Riley stated:

So, the two daughters [in the host family] did speak English. They were pretty much fluent in English. So, I talked mostly with the daughters and then I had a roommate who was also from [my home university]. She had passed the highest levels of [native language] classes so she could communicate with them perfectly fine---the parents, at least. So, the first day I got there my roommate wasn't there yet, and so I it was just me and the host dad, and it was kind of rough, but we got through it. (Riley)

This same participant went on to share that even though their expectation of fluency was not accurate, they were pleasantly surprised at how much of the language they did learn. Even so, they did not learn enough, according to their family upon returning home, which soured the excitement they had about returning home, which I will speak more about in a later section. Even though fluency in Riley's case is not specifically related to re-entry, this is still related to the Expectations Model. Riley expected to become fluent in six months prior to studying abroad, and once abroad Riley quickly realized fluency was not going to happen so quickly and they changed their expectations for language improvement. In the end, Riley was happy with the amount of language they did learn, even though that happiness was later replaced with feelings of inadequacy upon returning home and not being fluent. Riley's family had their own unrealistic expectations related to fluency as well, and maybe if both Riley and their family had been given information related to language levels and fluency prior to the sojourn, some of the feelings of disappointment could have been avoided.

A different student participating in the same program was also in the same position regarding knowledge of the language and not expecting to struggle with communicating as much as they did. This person described themselves as someone who "consistently speaks out against injustice and racism. That is not a problem for me. That's not something I'm afraid of doing"

(Ellis). This participant went on to state the following regarding communication and their frustrations:

I think my biggest issue, and the thing that really took down my mental health while there was the fact that because I wasn't fluent in [native language], I actually couldn't--- articulate my thoughts like I was understanding what people would say to me and understanding the source of the microaggression. And I was studying [host country] history. So, I had a wealth of knowledge about [host country] politics and its history, and how that tied into the mindset, I just could not---communicate that. (Ellis)

Riley and Ellis had similar starting points with regard to their level of knowledge of the host country's language and their expectations of learning the language, and both of them had American roommates who had studied the host country language and could speak it very well. They witnessed the ways in which their host families would speak to the roommates versus the way they were spoken to, if spoken to at all sometimes. This dynamic helped in some ways with language learning but not always; however, Riley's and Ellis' attitudes about returning home were different and thus their experiences upon returning home were different. In the end, they both expressed they would have had a different perspective if they had been given more information on what to expect during all stages of the sojourn.

Another participant, Hayden, spent years studying the language of their host country, and even studied abroad in the host country for a year in high school. The level of Hayden's knowledge of the host country's language was vastly superior to that of Riley and Ellis, both of whom are quoted above. Hayden completed most of their coursework in the host language and did not need to take any language courses while abroad. Hayden took an information technology and a poetry course, to list a couple, and both were taught in the host country language with

students from that country. In the poetry course, Hayden was one of three total students and participating verbally in the course was expected. When asked to describe the experience, Hayden stated:

So, it was really scary at first. I came in, and there were only these two [other students]. They were both pretty young and pretty shy, and I was like, what am I getting myself into? But I liked the class, and I wanted to take it. We got the like syllabus on the first day, and looked at all of the works we were going to be reading, and I saw Thomas Mann on there, and I was like I've tried to read Thomas Mann before, I'm not sure I'm going to get this, but you know what? It's my last semester. I don't have anything else to do, I'm just going to put everything into this class, and I'm going to do all of the readings. I'm going to participate so hard in class. I think I became the person who participated the most in that class... There were texts that I read, and I got nothing out of it. The professor would start talking, and he would ask a question, and he wanted discussion to happen, and I would just look around, and I was like they're not going to answer anything. So, I'm just gonna say something, and it ended up turning out well. I got a good grade in it. I think that was the best grade I got [the entire year abroad]. (Hayden)

Hayden's prior knowledge of the host country's language gave them more flexibility when choosing courses and the freedom to select courses, such as poetry, that they would not have been able to take without the extensive prior knowledge. The ability to take courses at the host university with local students led to forming friendships with more local students versus only American students, which ultimately effected their study abroad experience and their return home.

For the students who studied the host country language extensively prior to studying abroad, they tended to have a different reverse culture shock experience compared to those who studied in an English-speaking country or those who did not study the native language prior to studying abroad in the non-English speaking country. This was an unexpected finding. The students who studied the language of their host country prior to their sojourn spoke of an intense desire to return or more pointedly their specific plans to return to the host country as the United States no longer felt like their home, and their host country is now their home.

For the students who studied abroad in a non-English speaking country and did not study the language beforehand, they found themselves with some unique struggles they were not expecting. It may not have been obvious to these students that they would struggle with communication, especially with their host families (for many, a requirement of their programs) and host university administrators, even though they knew they could not speak the language. I did not get into why the interview participants did not consider this potential communication barrier, as that was not the focus of this study; however, it is important to note this interesting phenomenon.

While students' experiences with communication and expectations of fluency and language learning while abroad were not the focus of this study, it is still important to share this information as it provides context to the experiences of the students and how those experiences then effected the expectations for returning home, what it would be like for students upon their return, and the reality of their experiences. There are many variables to consider when comparing students' experiences to one another, and those variables can drastically alter the experiences, but two things remained consistent throughout this study and that is students wished

they had been prepared better and in a timelier manner for the return home, and they wished they had more opportunities to communicate about their experiences.

Location Choice

Several students listed a cultural heritage as part of their core identity in addition to being American, or in some cases, dual-citizenship, and those locations included: Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, and Scandinavia. Some of these students specifically chose their study abroad location based on that heritage. The Irish American student chose the United Kingdom, partly for its proximity to Ireland. The Croatian American student chose the United Kingdom because of its location in Europe in order to easily visit with friends and family from Croatia during and after the program. One of the students who identified as Mexican American, and has dual citizenship with Mexico, choose Mexico out of the desire to learn more about the culture of Mexico and to build a stronger connection with the country.

The majority of students (90%) did not choose a study abroad location based on their ethnic, racial, or cultural identity. Approximately 25% of the interview participants are students of color. Unfortunately, many students were significantly limited on their study abroad location options due to Covid-19 protocols. Many countries did not have open borders at the time students wanted to study abroad, so they had to choose countries with open borders or wait for another semester, in order to go. Four students had to choose their second or third choice locations because of the limited options. There were many reasons students chose their study abroad location, which are displayed in the following table, and in this study, the reason for choosing a location did not seem to have a direct relationship with an interview participant experiencing reverse culture shock.

Table 4. 1*Reason for Choosing Study Abroad Location*³

Location Reason	Number
Study non-English language	14
Host country language is English or English is widely spoken and accepted	8
Personal Cultural Heritage and/or proximity to non-American family	3
“Just Because”	7
Location had a strong program that related to student’s major	1
Friends were going there	2
Non-traditional location without many U.S. students	1
Thought host country would be the most diverse out of other options	1
Honors program requirement in that location	1

Being an American Abroad – Positives and Negatives

Since this study focused on experiences that U.S. citizens have after a study abroad sojourn, I was also able to ask interview participants briefly about their experiences as Americans abroad. Some common themes, and later codes in the analyzation process, which appeared when discussing this topic were positive feelings, negative feelings, criticalness (realizing criticism of the United States), skepticism, and Americanism (both increased and decreased). Interview participants had a lot to say regarding their experiences as Americans studying abroad, and those experiences varied as foretold by the themes/codes that emerged during the coding process. Surprisingly, experiences were considered mostly positive by the interview participants, even when being called out as an American or when conversations had a negative context, those conversations were mostly due to the non-Americans curiosity but were not intended to put the American student on the defensive. Hopefully, this was the case because

³ Total number is higher than 30 because some students had multiple reasons for choosing their study abroad program location.

many people realize that a single individual is not the embodiment of their government, and as one participant put it, “people are not just their government, they're just people. So, I think that was probably the most impactful part of that is seeing that perspective, and then applying that to myself” (Dillon).

Other students recognized for the first-time what privileges come with being an American abroad, especially those in a host country where the economic situation is not as strong as it is in the United States. They also realized how much they still love being an American, while also recognizing America is not the greatest country in the world, which tied in well to codes of Americanism and criticalness, or the ability to be critical of one’s own country:

I had a lot of privilege when I was there, especially economic privilege, because of the exchange rate I was taking an uber everywhere, every day. I can't normally afford that here, and also like the opportunity to travel and pay for you know hotels and go to nicer restaurants and buy like Starbucks and stuff like that. (Eden)

I wouldn't say I'm any less like proud, or whatever, I mean, I still consider myself a citizen. I still love my country it’s just if I had the opportunity to permanently move to [host city], I would. (Angel)

I'm still so proud to be an American like, but like it's still, I still identify as American, but it also just like I'm not so like I'm not gonna back up America all the time. (Spencer)

An important growth outcome from studying abroad is the ability to view one’s own country from the outside, while maintaining an understanding of how things work from the inside. Only a few interview participants were quoted here, but many experienced the aspect of growth during their study abroad programs that allowed them to realize their privileges as U.S. citizens and become critical of the United States at the same time.

Several students had experiences where non-Americans wanted to talk about American politics or policies, but the conversations were rarely confrontational. Conversations often focused on Donald Trump, gun laws, Roe v. Wade, or how uninformed Americans are compared to non-Americans. When I specifically asked interview participants if they felt they were treated any differently because they are American, two participants shared the following:

I don't necessarily think that they viewed Americans in a bad way, but I do think that as soon as they found out that I was American. They would just, they love to talk about American politics. They love to talk about Trump. So, that was something like they were always so invested in that as soon as they knew I was American. (Avery)

I definitely feel like people's expectations for me were extremely low [because I'm American] and with the [host country language] level that I went in with, it was very easy to exceed those expectations. So, on one hand, it was nice that I could like impress people very easily, but, on the other hand, I got really tired of everyone assuming that I was an idiot all the time. (Dillon)

When interview participants were asked how they feel as an American now compared to before they left for their sojourn, two major phrases were used to describe their feelings: more critical and more skeptical (again, two codes used during the analyzation process). Many students had the chance to learn from non-Americans how outsiders view the U.S., or they were able to see the way the U.S. is portrayed by non-U.S. news sources. Those students expressed that their world views have been broadened and they are less America-centric than they were before, coded as the "effect of interactions" during the analyzation process which comprised of fifteen different quotes from interview participants describing this experience. Furthermore, this supports results from McKeown's (2009) study that students' views are often more "culturally

pluralistic” after a study abroad experience and they now realize there are a variety of ways society can be organized, and U.S. society is “not the only ‘right’ way” (p.45).

Many students expressed being torn between the positives of the US and the positives of other countries, in the end saying there are positives and negatives about both countries. Studying abroad made some students realize the privilege they have as Americans with regard to the ease of traveling that being an American offers them. One student specifically recalls feeling a sense of shame as an American because they could come and go from [host country] as they please but friends from [host country] or their host family cannot come and go from the United States so easily. Those from [host country] must apply for visas and might have to wait months for an appointment. When asked specifically how the student sees themselves as an American now compared to before the sojourn, the student said this:

There is more shame attached to it. Being a U.S. citizen and having certain privileges that non-U.S. citizens have or don't have, especially when it comes to the political context; having certain privileges of being a U.S. citizen living within the U.S. And how non-U.S. citizens across the globe are affected by decisions that are made by the U.S. and our government. I felt that. Seeing how hard it is for people even to get into the U.S. from [host country], like they need to have an interview at a U.S. Embassy, if they want to get even a simple tourist visa, for example, and how right now, the wait time there to get an interview is two years⁴, yet I am free to travel there without an interview, and I'm given a tourist visa upon arrival into the country. (Eden)

⁴ It is worth noting that some of the wait times had increased dramatically due to Covid-19, and as of July 19, 2022, the average wait time in [country], across the 9 consulate locations and the U.S. Embassy was 556.9 days (Bier, 2022) whereas as of February 5, 2023, the average across those 10 locations was still 475.4 days (U.S. State Department 5 Feb 2023)

The experience of being an American abroad did have an effect on the reentry experience for some students. As Eden is quoted above, realizing the privilege they have as Americans was very impactful and for some comparing life abroad, inexpensive Ubers and coffees, with the higher prices in the United States was difficult. This created more longing for the host country or what some might consider reverse homesickness.

For interview participants, being an American abroad led to temporary rejection of the United States and/or Americans, in general, upon their return home. This temporary rejection is a common occurrence in study abroad returnees, according to Martin (1986). As Blake described:

When I came home, I felt everything, like I like almost didn't want to be an American. I like came home, and I was like, I felt so like clear-minded, and like I could finally see. And it was really sad... People are a lot more inconsiderate here, like I noticed in [host country region], like people are very just outgoing and kind, and even to strangers, and I feel like that's not the same way here, and I felt like, I don't know the right word for it, but I just, I almost felt like disappointed coming home in a sense, and, like I don't know. It was really weird. (Blake)

The feeling of disappointment, not only in returning from a study abroad program but also in the realization of differences between the host country and the United States is a regular occurrence for study abroad returnees. The comparison of the host country culture and home country culture is a major part of reverse culture shock, especially if a student never realized certain aspects of their home culture until they left and returned home.

If study abroad returnees regularly report feeling loneliness, isolation, and a newfound criticism or skepticism for the United States, preparing students for these feelings is important.

Students are unlikely to share their new thoughts on being an American after living abroad because they are concerned what family or friends, who did not study abroad, will think of them or view them (Martin, 1986), so students and their families should be made aware of these possible changes with the explanation that exposure to new cultures with different views or ways of doing things should be expected during a study abroad experience and might lead some students to change their own perspectives.

Growth from Studying Abroad – Increasing Maturity, Confidence, and Independence

Overwhelmingly, students expressed that they did change during their study abroad program, which has resulted in them feeling different from who they were before they studied abroad. They are more mature, confident, and independent than they were prior to studying abroad, and all three of these adjectives were used as themes and codes during analysis of the data since they appeared so frequently. While abroad, they navigated housing issues, public transportation, booking flights/hotels/etc. for personal trips, and often had to rely completely on themselves for the first time because time zone differences prevented them from calling a family member or friend to ask for advice. Students expressed being more comfortable alone since commuting to and from school would be at separate times from classmates, peers, or friends. Students also feel more certain about who they are now, and they no longer feel like a child.

Students made statements like:

“I definitely feel more confident now, especially like [compared to] when I first started college as a freshman, I was definitely pretty insecure.” (Quinn)

“I feel a lot more confident in myself and in my abilities to succeed and navigate the world.” (Dillon)

“I feel like I'm a lot more confident like in who I am” and “I'm more sure of who I am, and I'm more confident in like not bending to who I'm around, and trying to like fit in.”

(Spencer)

“Now I feel like, more like an adult, because I like, you know, I plan my own trips. I bought tickets. I found the hotels. Before it just seemed so intimidating. Now I'm like well, I can do this, so definitely I would identify more as an independent person.”

(Quinn)

“Maybe the biggest change is personal development. I feel like I was already a I'm already a pretty mature person for my age I was. I turned 20 the first month I moved there, so it's 19 turning 20---but I feel like it made me more mature, like a fast track on maturity for sure. (Dakota)

This growth in independence, maturity and confidence is supported by Baxter Magolda's 1992 longitudinal study on development in university students, studied throughout their entire college experience, as well as Citron's 1996 study where students self-reported growth in these two areas (as cited by McKeown, 2009). While most U.S. university students showed growth in independence and self-confidence, those who studied abroad, especially those who studied in a non-English speaking country, showed an elevated level of growth in those areas compared to those who did not participate in a study abroad program (Baxter Magolda, 1992). As displayed by the quotes above, students recognize the ways in which studying abroad changed them, and for some they realize that friends and family who have not shared a similar growth experience have a more challenging time understanding the returnee than those who studied abroad previously. Friends and family have an influence on the ways in which returnees experience

reverse culture shock, especially if there is a lack of understanding between the returnee and those who did not study abroad and difficulty in communication.

Reverse Culture Shock

Recalling Information from Pre-Departure Orientations

Almost all interview participants reported attending at least one, if not multiple, pre-departure orientations with the study abroad office at their home university and sometimes with the study abroad program coordinators, if they did a program coordinated by a different university or a study abroad company. All of the pre-departure orientations were held via Zoom or another online video conferencing service. Orientations were not held in-person, mostly because of Covid-19 protocols. These orientations were often described as long and packed with a plethora of information. Interview participants had a difficult time recalling all of the information provided to them, but stated multiple times that the majority of the information was “logistics” related to leaving the United States, such as obtaining visas (where required), arriving in the host country, choosing courses, housing information, and safety concerns. It was not surprising to learn that the interview participants could not recall information shared during a lengthy meeting, across several meetings, or in an online course management module, and described the information received as mostly related to logistics (in other words, boring). Information during pre-departure orientations and meetings typically is more logistical and safety focused and comes from study abroad administrators not students’ peers, who typically share the “fun” information about studying abroad.

At some point during the orientations, there would be a slide or two regarding culture shock the students could expect to experience upon arrival in the host country and during the first few weeks of the program. Less than half of the interview participants recalled information

about reverse culture shock from a pre-departure orientation or course, and for most of those who did recall seeing information about reverse culture shock, they could not remember the details of it. Two interview participants specifically remembered seeing a shape, diagram, or curve regarding reverse culture shock, but they could not describe it to me – one student specifically stated it was shaped like an “M,” but that was most likely Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s W-curve. Students also would not recall that information later on when experiencing signs or symptoms of reverse culture shock later.

Some interview participants who did not attend a pre-departure orientation were required to complete a course through an online learning platform, such as D2L or Coursera. The course discussed all of the information that they would have received in a pre-departure orientation. Often this online course was associated with one credit, and “graded” as a Pass or Fail, likely so that students would feel obligated to actually complete the coursework so as to not earn a failing grade. Through the pre-departure courses, students were given the same information that those who attended pre-departure orientations received. Most of them also could not recall what information was provided to them regarding reverse culture shock or if they were given any information at all. As quoted above, Dillon found the D2L orientation course to be a lot of busy work, especially for a one-credit course, and it came at a time when they were trying to focus on final exams and papers the semester before leaving for the study abroad program. Reese also had a D2L pre-departure orientation course and disliked the format, saying, “I had access to these videos and stuff, but it looks like schoolwork. It's in D2L. It was a mandatory thing I had to do so maybe if they had like sent a video or something [about reverse culture shock before the return home], I would have watched it.”

At the time of the orientations or the online course, students expressed feelings of excitement and nervousness surrounding their departure and arrival to the host country. The last thing they were thinking about was their return to the United States after the end of their programs, and specifically expressed that information given to them at this time regarding their return to the U.S. was unhelpful. This brings the question, “Why are study abroad offices or program coordinators providing information relevant to students’ return during a time when they are preparing to go abroad?” When I asked interview participants when they would have wanted to receive information on reverse culture shock, overwhelmingly, they answered the information would have been best received toward the end of the study abroad program as either an email or part of a pre-return meeting, around the same time they were being reminded about the logistical requirements of leaving the host country. Several interview participants also expressed receiving the information shortly after returning home and/or at the start of the next semester at the home university would have also been helpful. All interview participants either expressed wanting the information toward the end of their program or shortly after returning home, not during a pre-departure orientation prior to the start of the sojourn:

Probably towards the end of my program Maybe when they were sending out like the information about like the Covid testing and to get back, and like a reminder to check into your flight like type of thing, like a week or 2 before the end. It would have like allowed me to enjoy the entirety of my semester, but then also be prepared at the end. So, without having to worry [about how] that's going to happen during the semester. (Riley)

I think actually, it would have been helpful if someone maybe reached out a month prior and said, ‘hey, just a reminder, you might want to die when you move back.’ (Dakota – said in jest)

Like everyone knows about culture shock obviously, like that's, they talk about that all the time. Without saying the word 'culture shock' they always explained to you, 'hey, you're gonna feel weird, things going to be weird.' Never once have they said the opposite, what happens when you come home. So, I mean for me it'd be like, why not mention it at the same time? Just have the seed in someone's head because that's what I think would be the most effective, just like making sure people think about it. But even somewhere, as far as like a month before you leave from wherever you are in the world. (Jaime)

Send like an email even before leaving the country, just so you're prepared to know what to do when you get back or like, once I got back something from like my home university, or like the program, like I said so preferably sooner rather than later. (Rowan)

The interview participants clearly wished they had received information about reverse culture shock, or at least more information about it, and at a later stage in the sojourn. The interview participants wanted to know what they should expect with regard to returning home. For them, if they had known what to expect, they might have been able to manage the experiences better, just as the Expectations Model indicates. This information would ideally have been shared by students' peers who studied abroad for similar lengths of time in similar locations, with some guidance and input from study abroad administrators, so it can be contextualized for those preparing to return home.

Preparing for the Return to the United States – Excited, Sad, and Bittersweet

Some students did partially prepare themselves for their return home, although most preparations were logistical (packing, returning keys, confirming flights, etc.). While these preparations were helpful in the short-term or the immediate sense, they were not related to the

emotional experience of leaving the host country, returning to the United States, or reverse culture shock. Program coordinators or advisors rarely provided any information to students about leaving the host country or returning to the United States and returning to their home universities other than logistics, such as submit all final papers and exams, obtain transcripts from host university (when possible), confirm credits transfer back to home university, etc., mirroring the experiences the interview participants had with their pre-departure orientations and courses.

During the weeks leading up to their return, students consistently reported feeling anxious about their return to the United States or having feelings of sadness and denial that the program was ending. Pre-return meetings held during this time were helpful reminders of the logistical steps students needed to take prior to leaving the host country, but they were not helpful to students who were experiencing intense feelings of sadness and denial. For the majority of students interviewed, these meetings did not provide an opportunity to debrief about the study abroad experience or to discuss impending departures from the host country and returning to the U.S. Many interviewees tried to pretend they were not leaving but yet also tried to squeeze in as many things as they could the last few weeks or days. For some, their denial of the end of the program got the best of them because they put off packing and preparing until the final day or finals hours, which led to a lot of additional mental and emotional stress and physical chaos for them. Several of the codes from this section of the interviews and the analysis process were denial, dread, chaotic, sad, bittersweet, ready, happy, and no preparation. There are negative and positive themes that can be deduced from these codes. Understandably, interview participants were feeling ranges of emotions preparing to return to the United States, and many could have used some support to process that vast range in emotions. As is discussed in Chapter

5 in more detail, study abroad students need time to debrief prior to returning home, and a guided facilitation for debriefing could have better prepared the interview participants in this study for the end of their program and the return back to the United States.

For the students who did not truly mentally prepare for what returning home would be like, it was often because they did not have any time to actually consider it and had no idea what to expect. Their final weeks abroad were filled with final papers and exams, squeezing in last minute trips, visits to tourist attractions they had not yet seen, patronizing their favorite restaurants, cafes, bars, etc., and the last-minute logistics of packing, cleaning, confirming travel arrangements, and making sure their luggage was not going to be overweight (a very big concern for many of the students). Many students described their last few days as chaotic, hectic, and stressful. Dillon felt “mentally unstable” regarding the experience:

It was a bit of a mentally unstable time, like mental health wise, a bit of an unstable time in that respect, but, like I still wanted to make the most of the rest of my time there. So, I did as much as I could to, like, to hang out with people and make memories in that last little bit. But it was very much like a race to experience as much as possible before I had to go back to my normal life. (Dillon, who found a way to handle this stress, as quote just below)

Other students who had similar experiences in those final weeks and days had this to say about their preparations:

I think it was a lot of just finals and studying and stress with packing, so I was probably a bit more overwhelmed than I was, you know, enjoying and soaking it all in one last time. (Angel, who was not able to enjoy everything one last time because of the stress of finals and packing.)

There wasn't much preparation, but also mainly because I didn't know what to expect.

(Rowan)

No, not really. I mean I was. I was just more concerned with not going over the weight limits. I don't think I really prepared myself like, 'okay, I'm going back to America. Get ready for a different life.' I just like, all right. Just get this stuff together and just worry about it when you get there. I think, because it happened so quick, like we had to get out so quick. People [I] truly couldn't process like what just happened. (Jaime)

For many of these interview participants, the final days were just too busy for them to really reflect on what returning home might be like. This is partially an issue with the way study abroad programs are often structured. Once the last day of classes or the last day of final exams takes place, students are expected to leave the following day or weekend. There is rarely a grace period that allows students several days after final exams or papers are due for them to decompress from that experience and begin the process of packing, cleaning, and leaving. Again though, it is also a matter of referencing the Expectations Model and setting the expectations for students.

Some interview participants felt more than prepared for the return home from a logistical and mental standpoint. They actively journaled or planned out their final days so leaving did not feel so stressful or rushed. This is what they had to say:

I journaled a lot. I kept a diary, irregularly from like March through May, but then May through July I kept it pretty regular, so I realized, 'oh, crap! Time is running out. I gotta write this down, so I don't forget it.' So, the journaling was really helpful. Yeah, it's pretty much the only thing I did preparation wise. (Dillon, later in the interview gave this quote, but they also stated previously that they felt "mentally unstable" the last few days)

I journaled and reflected so much, and I was so ready. I was on the plane. I was totally okay. And then I remember when the first plane landed in the States. I think I heard like all these American accents. I saw these tacky t-shirts, freaking slides everywhere, and I was like, I can't do this. I can't. I need to go back; I journalled a lot. So, I reflected. I put up some boundaries like in my head and wrote down some goals. And so that's what I did to prepare. (Dakota)

[I prepared by] just going through like what I'd written down [in my journal]. There's a lot of like self-care and self-reflection that I had throughout those months, and just realizing like where I was from point A to point B. (Judith)

It seems that journaling and having the time and space to reflect on their experiences made the return process easier for these interview participants. They continued journalling upon their return home to work through their feelings and make meaning of their experiences. Not all students took this approach, but for those who did, it was helpful and possibly calmed some of the chaos of those final days.

Envisioning the Re-entry Experience – Expectations vs. Reality

Overall, students were not sure what to expect for their return home. The range of responses from the students varied from zero expectations or only having some jet lag to expecting a large welcome home party from family and friends who would want to hear everything about the student's study abroad experience from start to finish. Their actual experiences were also quite varied, which I will discuss below. The varied expectations, however, can be attributed to the limited travel experiences and/or the limited information provided to students prior to their departure and during their sojourn, but students overwhelmingly stated they wished they had been given more information, if for no other reason

than knowing what their experience might be like, what to expect, and where to turn if or when they were to have any negative experiences or feelings after returning home from the sojourn.

As stated previously, expectations varied from student to student. For some students, their expectations were met exactly, but for most others, their expectations were completely different than what they actually experienced. There was a common theme among those students of expectations not meeting reality. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Expectations Model, as it relates to reverse culture shock, indicates that the more prepared a person is prior to their return, the easier time they will have navigating reverse culture shock. Even though some students did learn a bit about reverse culture and recalled that information during challenging times post-sojourn, the reverse culture shock they were expecting did not match their experiences, likely leading to any the stress they experienced. While it is not possible to prepare students for every single potential challenge they might experience, there are better ways to heighten expectations for students and provide them with the knowledge they need to navigate the phenomenon themselves or to know when and where to seek guidance if they are struggling. Additionally, there are better times at which this information should be shared with study abroad participants so that they have a better chance of remembering it later.

For Dillon, who spent one week abroad during high school and specifically recalled receiving information about reverse culture shock prior to the sojourn via their study abroad orientation course in D2L⁵. Based on what they had learned, they envisioned the return to feel like a hard stop on their time abroad and a sudden reentry back to normal life, “I had it in my head that it was going to be like a really abrupt transition like, Boom, okay, we're back to normal

⁵ D2L or Desire2Learn, is an online learning platform utilized by some universities for online courses or to supplement other teaching modalities such as hybrid or flipped models. In this study, several students mentioned their pre-departure orientation was a class taught via D2L or a similar online learning platform.

now, back to regular life.” In reality, Dillon, tested positive for Covid-19 shortly after returning home and had to quarantine and rest for a few weeks, which resulted in a “slow reintegration,” in their opinion. This same participant went on to say, “I wasn't ready to come back, and when I did come back it was hard for me to readjust to just that old way of living [former routines].”

When asked if expectations of returning home matched their actual experience, they shared:

Not really. If I'm being honest when they told me about [reverse] culture shock, and what that was going to be like, I was expecting it to be more, but it was more like a kind of subtle mental culture shock for me when I got back. I didn't really expect that it would be hard to tell stories about [host city], but it was pretty difficult because like my roommates don't really ask about it, and I don't really bring it up unless they ask about it because, like it was my experience, and they weren't there, and it's super hard for me to explain my experience when they had no part in it.

So, Dillon had some small expectations based on information provided to them during the pre-departure orientation course, but they could not recall the exact information that was provided to them other than reverse culture shock would happen resulting in a misalignment of expectations and reality. When asked about the pre-departure orientation course, Dillon shared:

It was mostly just a pain in the ass to do because it was asynchronous and online. And I had a whole bunch of other classes I needed to worry about, and it was a ridiculous amount of busy work for a one-credit orientation. They did give us resources for like reading about initial culture shock, and then a reverse culture shock as well.

Even though they had been given the resources, prior to their sojourn, which is not an ideal time to be receiving important information – six to twelve months before needing it – they did not recall the information they had read about reverse culture shock, just that there were numerous

links to reading materials versus relevant information inside the course shell in D2L. The timing of when students receive information about reverse culture and how they receive that information or how the information is presented to them is important in order for them to recall that information during periods or episodes of reverse culture shock.

At least two of the interview participants, Judith and Emery, actually received information regarding reverse culture shock closer to the end of their programs, but the information did not come from the home university for either student. Judith had a professor from the host university end a lesson early one day to speak about reverse culture shock. Judith was enrolled in a communication course, taught in English, with other study abroad students from the United States. This was not a programmatic meeting, but rather a local professor, from the host country, who took it upon herself to discuss the end of the study abroad program and the concept of reverse culture shock with the students during class time. During this meeting, which happened a week or two prior to the end of the study abroad program, the professor asked the class to sit in small groups and began asking questions about if the students were looking forward to returning home, if they would miss the host country and what they would miss about it. The professor then went into explaining reverse culture shock and giving examples of what students might experience after they returned.

Judith specifically recalled the professor optimistically telling the class that it was ok to miss the host country and they should remember that they can always come back. It is important to note that Judith struggled greatly with culture shock at the start of their program, and by the end they knew they would miss the host country, but they were very much looking forward to returning home. Judith did not feel they experienced a high level of reverse culture shock, which is in line with what some researchers believe, if a student struggles significantly on the front end

of the sojourn with culture shock, then they are less likely to struggle as much with reverse culture shock upon their return (Wedin, 2010). However, Judith reported they thought they had personally experienced reverse culture shock to a lower degree than other students because they were expecting it after having had the meeting with the professor and classmates. This meeting held at the end of the semester for about an hour provided them with a base of knowledge regarding reverse culture shock, and they attribute their ease with reentry to this impromptu meeting. Again, the expectation of even possibly experiencing reverse culture shock was enough for Judith to have an easier time with adjustment than others. Judith's expectations were more aligned with the reality of returning home.

Emery also recalled receiving information about reverse culture shock shortly before returning home, but the information they received came from a Christian-based book given to them by some "agricultural missionaries from Colorado," who had spent a lot of time going back and forth between the United States and the host country. When asked to describe the circumstances, Emery stated:

They sat down and talked to me like a couple of weeks before the end, and like kind of walked me through [what I might experience] ... They gave me this book that I read it's called, "Re-entry." It's like 200 pages, but it's just like basically walks you through, 'Okay, you've been immersed in another culture, either for a short amount of time or a long amount of time. This is how you come home, and how you come home well.' So, that really helped me, and I read that like in the end of my time.

While I have not read the specific book Emery discussed, they did go on to share the book talked a lot about not expecting people to ask a lot of detailed questions about the study abroad experience, how people may not want to hear their stories, looking for social cues that people are

not interested, being prepared for family or friends to notice differences in the way that the interview participant has changed that they did not notice themselves, and even what it might be like to return to their home church or ministry and the differences they will notice there. Finally, Emery shared, “if I hadn't had that book, or any resources or someone helping me through it, yeah, it would have been a lot harder.” Again, going back to the Expectations Model, knowing what to expect makes the actual experience easier to navigate. It might not change the complexity of the experience, but preparing students gives them a starting point and potential resources to which they can turn when they need them. Pursuant to one of the themes of this chapter, aligning expectations and reality is an important aspect of discussing reverse culture shock with study abroad students prior to their return home. Emery relates their easier time of returning home to the knowledge gained from the re-entry book they received as a gift at the end of their program.

I compiled some of the other interview participants' responses when asked how they envisioned their return to the United States and if their expectations were the same as what they experienced in reality. The compilation is in Table 4.2, and it can be found on the following pages. Expectations and the reality of the participants' experiences varied greatly. While many students did express they expected more people to be interested in hearing about their time abroad, and were subsequently disappointed by the lack of interest from friends and family back home, others had fairly dismal outlooks on how “lackluster” (Jordan) and “unexciting” (Riley) returning home would be. It was a common theme that expectations did not match reality, and it led to students feeling more disappointment upon returning home than they really should have. Returning home can be both a joyous and sad experience, but the sadness should not come from

the difference in expectations and reality, but rather from the end of the study abroad program and the life students experienced abroad.

Table 4. 2*Expectations of Returning Home versus the Reality*

Participant	Travelled Abroad Before?	Knew or recalled info about RCS?	How they envisioned returning home - Participant Quotes	Their reality of returning home - Participant Quotes
Ellis	No	No	I expected a much more positive reception than I think I got. I think I expected people to be a little more curious than they were about my experience.	I think I expected people to be a little more curious than they were about my experience, like I was just gone for 6 months experiencing the world, and it seemed like no one cared, and like it was weird because I didn't want to like brag. It definitely wasn't like a bragging thing or like, 'Oh, I'm better than you,' but more so like I just had so much fun, and also trauma like, please let me share it with you like extensively, and no one seemed down to do that
Avery	Yes, multiple times	No	I didn't really think like it would be that difficult. I figured I would just go home and be super tired, and then, like see my family, and then it would be fine. I didn't really think that I wasn't too worried about that. I thought it would just be like nothing changed.	I think I definitely have a love-hate relationship with America and that was what I expected, and what also it was like that before I went...But I do think not being as excited by [large metropolitan city, location of home university] is something that I didn't expect.

Riley	3 weeks in high school	No	I didn't think it would be very exciting. I knew that I like. As soon as I got picked up, I would see my mom, and then I knew that, like the next stop going home was to stop by and see my grandma. And I was a little bit fearful that they would be like everyone would just expect me to know [host country language], and like absolutely just know it.	Yes, I think my expectations matched [with regard to family]. They didn't really understand like why I like [host country] so much. Why was it so important to me. They understood it in terms of like, yeah, that's cool that you visited a country, but they didn't understand why, like I was like, 'No [host country] itself, I really like [host country], compared to like Italy or somewhere else.'
Jordan	3 weeks in high school	No	I just wanted my parents to be at the airport. That was impossible because of Covid. (Parents were too ill to meet them at the airport.)	[Yes], I kind of expected it to be lackluster.
Rowan	family vacations	No	I envisioned it being a lot bigger than it was. I guess I envisioned people being a lot more open to hearing about my experiences because I wanted to talk about them. I want to talk about my experiences.	I expected to feel a lot more pride about where I was from about being like being able to go home and be like, 'Yes, this is where I'm from. This is this is my home.' And then, not feeling that, I think, was something I wasn't expecting. I wanted to share [my experience] with everybody and I was surprised at how much people don't really want to hear or care about your experience. So, I was a little disappointed with that.
Jaime	extensively travelled	No, not until study recruitment email	I don't know. I guess I didn't really expect anything. I don't think I even was thinking about back home until I was like landing. I was kind of worried about if I could even leave [host country] at that point [due to needing a negative Covid-19 test], which at the same time I kind of wish I got stuck in [host country] too.	It's the same old same world like nothing's changed here. You can just you can like, even though I always say [host city] is really calm, I could see like the different style of calmness over like my [home] city. I was like, it's almost like, dead, like drab.

Carter	Yes	No	<p>I had envisioned it fairly celebratory especially because I was, you know, immediately going back to my family. I wasn't going back to [home university], so I just envisioned like seeing my family and my pets in my house and being really happy and like home. But also, like I kind of knew I was gonna feel a little bit like bored and like, 'What am I gonna do with myself for these couple of days before I move to a [home university city] and start my job?'</p>	<p>It was probably a bit more like anticlimactic than I was expecting, just because, you know, I was a little bit home sick while I was in [host city]. I was, you know, excited to see people, and then I actually got home, and it's just, you know my boring life is back, so in that regard it was a little bit anticlimactic.</p>
Phoebe	No	Yes	<p>I feel like in my head. I had envisioned my return. It's like this big like, 'Oh! [Participant Name] is home!' with my family, and it was very much not. I thought that people wanted to hear about the experience...</p>	<p>One of the hardest things is like, just kind of, everyone else, like everyone else's life is still going, and you just kind of like slide back into the timeline of everyone else... I thought it was going to be a lot easier to come home and again, like I know, reverse culture shock, like I had information on it. I knew to expect it, and it was still like the craziest thing. I feel like, it's still like, I've been home for oh, probably like 7 months now, and it's still like, [reverse culture shock] is still very prevalent in my life.</p>

Morgan	multiple times	Yes	I knew my family would be excited to see me. I think I felt like everybody would want to know, like what I did... You expect like the world to be shaking at your return... So, I think I was just expecting people to want to know more about what I was doing because it's so different than the life that I live here, I was very independent there.	No! Because my expectations were that everybody would want to know because I just traveled the world. But nobody did [want to know], so that was like a kind of a realization of like, 'oh, yeah, okay, I'm, you know, I'm not that special. I am just a human being. And this is for some people, this is the norm. They travel all the time.' So, yeah that was kind of my little expectation that kind of didn't go that way.
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Did Prior Knowledge of Reverse Culture Shock Help? It is all about the timing.

For the students who did have a more accurate expectation of what the return or re-entry process would be like, they often reported knowing what to expect based on their travel experiences prior to studying abroad not because the information they might have received during a pre-departure orientation about reverse culture shock was useful or easily recalled. Students who traveled abroad while growing up could recall those experiences when returning from their study abroad programs. They knew to expect their experiences could include: a period of sadness; missing their host country; missing their life abroad; and constantly comparing their host country with life back in the United States. Some common themes emerged during the coding process regarding prior knowledge of reverse culture shock and whether or not it was useful. For students who recalled receiving information during a pre-departure session, the concept of timing came up frequently, as they did not feel the timing of when they received information about reverse culture shock was useful. They expressed the need to have received the information toward the end or after the end of their study abroad programs, again related to the benefits of better timing. For those who had already experienced traveling abroad and reverse culture shock previously, the timing of when they received information was not as relevant.

As expected, when I asked students if they had travelled much while growing up or prior to their study abroad sojourn, the answers varied greatly. Some students had never flown over the ocean until they studied abroad or had never travelled outside of the U.S. Some had never even been outside of the states that border their home state. Other students had traveled extensively growing up, within the US and outside of the US. One student spent every summer in Eastern Europe with grandparents and family who still live there, and this participant, in particular, experienced less reverse culture shock than any other student. This student does not

believe they experienced reverse culture shock at all, only minor annoyances upon returning home when noticing the differences between their own urban home city and the urban city in which they studied abroad, but the student was used to the compulsion to compare after returning from a sojourn. Since studying abroad was not this student's first meaningful experience abroad, it is possible the student was at a higher intellectual developmental level than their peers who had not spent a significant amount of time abroad before, resulting in less reverse culture shock experienced (McKeown, 2009). In this sense, the student also did not experience as much intellectual growth upon returning home as their peers possibly did because the development level was already higher, and growth can be a result of experiencing challenges (McKeown, 2009.)

A small number of students had studied abroad during high school, either for a year, half a year, or a couple of months. One student in particular, Hayden, spent a year abroad during junior year (third year) of high school. This was through a Rotary Scholarship, and she traveled to a country in Western Europe. She specifically recalled receiving information about reverse culture shock during that program and could recall that information when she experienced reverse culture shock upon her return from the university study abroad program.

So, my high school study abroad program with rotary, it's like, the preparation is insane. They call it like the 3 Year Exchange, because you spend a year getting ready, a year there, and then they have all this stuff when you come back. You go to like retreats and stuff to [talk about the experience], and that was not at all that even happened. In college, I think we had one or 2 like zoom sessions, but that was mostly talking about just logistics like, 'Here's how you get a cell phone when you arrive for like a SIM card when

you arrive in [host country], this is how the subway works. It was, it was all very practical stuff. (Hayden)

Those who had gone abroad during high school had received more information about reverse culture shock during those programs compared to their university programs. One could probably argue that high school students are not adults and are less mature than university students, so they would need more resources and outlets regarding their experiences abroad, but as some studies have shown, adults also have a difficult time with acculturation and reentry, even more so than younger people do (Altweck & Marshall, 2015).

Nearly all of the participants in this study (90%) expressed they did experience some form of reverse culture shock. For one of the three interview participants who claimed not to experience reverse culture shock, this student chose their study abroad location due to its proximity to non-American family members, which made it easier to visit them. This student had traveled to that country almost every summer their entire life, so while the specific location of the study abroad program did not necessarily impact the experience of reverse culture shock, the region in which the student studied abroad could have contributed to them not experiencing it due to their previous travel experiences to that region every summer while growing up:

I had done a lot of travel before [studying abroad]. I've been traveling my entire life. My dad's from [country outside of the United States], so I've been going there every summer since I was born. So, I didn't have like a hard time adjusting in terms of that, just because I'm fairly used to international travel. So, like you know, flying by myself internationally, getting used to being in a new country, like even pharmacies, grocery stores, all that stuff, I was pretty confident going into just because I've been doing it my whole life. (Quinn)

Quinn was in a region of the world that was very familiar to them and had travelled to and from this region numerous times, which they attribute to the fact that they feel they did not experience any challenges upon returning to the United States. When they returned home, they went back into their regular routine living in the United States, “Once I was back. I was kind of right back in it, making sure to go check on my grandma and feed the dog when he needed. So, I kind of felt like I was back into my routine.” Quinn later went on to state they did not believe they experienced any form of reverse culture shock, and the transition back home was easy. The ease at which this participant returned home and the lack of challenges they faced is likely related to the frequent amount of travel they did growing up, both with family and sometimes alone. None of the other interview participants travelled as frequently as Quinn did or had growing up, so it is not surprising that Quinn had expectations of returning home that matched their experiences. This was not something new to experience.

A couple of students recall having pre-return meetings or orientations prior to their departures from the host country and subsequent return to the United States. Again, these meetings were more about the logistics of leaving, paperwork they needed to collect, returning dormitory keys (where relevant), obtaining Covid-19 test results, and confirming airline reservations. The information shared or discussed rarely involved reverse culture shock. On the rare occasion that a discussion was had regarding what the return to the United States might be like, students recalled positive experiences sharing their concerns about leaving the host country and apprehension surrounding the return to the U.S. The timing of these meetings at the end of the study abroad programs was beneficial to these students because they were able to share their concerns about returning to the U.S. at a time when it was relevant and at the forefront of their minds. Trying to imagine what returning to the U.S. will be like before a study abroad program

even begins, like during a pre-departure orientation meeting or course, is difficult. Students should receive information that is relevant to their most immediate future actions.

Three students shared that they had no knowledge of reverse culture shock, and if they had received information at any point, they do not remember it all. Two of these students claimed the first time they had even heard the phrase "reverse culture shock" was from the subject line of the recruitment email they received from their study abroad office, which was sent to them on my behalf:

No, honestly, the first time I saw it [reverse culture shock] was when that email came through, and I was like, 'oh, that's, I didn't really think about that part,' because I obviously knew about regular culture shock, but I never really thought about coming back and being scared or worried. (Jaime)

For another student, I had to define and describe reverse culture shock after I asked if the student believes they experienced it. Upon hearing the definition and some examples of reverse culture shock, the student knew they had experienced it but had never had a way to explain it properly:

Yeah, I would say, I definitely did experience that, and I guess maybe still kind of experiencing it of like, there are so many things that I do prefer here [U.S.], but there are also a lot of things I prefer there and I miss, not even just from [host city], but like even other places, we travelled to that I would love to go back. Yeah, I would say, I did experience that, ...it definitely could have been helpful to know that, I guess, like all those things you [interviewer] mentioned, like I've recognized. I just didn't have like a word for it. (Sawyer)

Knowing about and understanding the concept of reverse culture shock would have been helpful to the students, even if it simply allowed them to give a name to their experiences and recognize

that it is a real “thing” that a lot of returnees experience. Again, it is important to provide students with information during times when it is relevant to their situations and experiences. For the student who did not have a definition of reverse culture shock prior to the interview, providing that information in that moment was helpful to them because they now had the vocabulary to articulate what they were experiencing.

Navigating Reverse Culture Shock

Interview participants were met with a variety of challenges after returning home, mixed with reverse culture shock and either longing to return to their host country or missing their life abroad, but then, in between some of those situations, things were ok. Reverse culture shock was not a continuous experience for them, and the challenges did not appear all at the same time. This challenge of integration represents Y.Y. Kim’s Cultural Spiral of Adjustment (2001) but as it relates to reentry and not exactly communication. Interview participants expressed challenges shortly after returning home, like jetlag, American food, shifts in daily schedules, and living with their parents again, and then once again when returning to university, such as feeling “like a stranger” (Ellis), different academic systems and class structures, and physically being back on campus (after Covid-19 shutdowns and a semester or more abroad). These various challenges at different times could be plotted on a graph to show that students experience reverse culture shock in a variety of ways and times, not in a linear fashion like the previously mentioned U- or W-curves. Seeing the challenge points taking place over time, again, partially represents Kim’s Cultural Spiral of Adjustment, although it could be argued to be more like a scatter plot than anything remotely linear or following a spiral.

A few interview participants shared that they have therapists or counselors who helped them process their study abroad experience and returning home because they did not have

anyone else they could speak with. Interview participants expressed they had negative feelings, such as: loneliness, isolation, confusion, depression, boredom, stress, anxiety, sadness, being lost, anger, frustration, dismay, and hopelessness when they felt they were experiencing periods of reverse culture shock, and that is not an exhaustive list. Many of those feelings became in vivo codes when analyzing the interview data and later formed a larger theme of negative feelings experienced when interview participants were navigating reverse culture shock. Most interview participants felt these feelings regularly after returning home and felt many of the emotions simultaneously. Several of the interview participants also found some positive emotions in the midst of experiencing reverse culture shock or upon their return home, such as: gratitude, excitement to see friends, stronger appreciation of family, and a sense of “empowerment to take on the world” (Morgan), all of which were attributed to the positives of returning home.

Some interview participants were able to find ways of navigating the emotions related to reentry and reverse culture shock. Those who lived with a host family, whether that was a single person or a large family with kids, talked about the importance of food and how food helps them through times of sadness related to their sojourn. Post sojourn, the students often cook snacks or meals that were commonly served by their host families when they are experiencing feelings of sadness or just missing their life abroad. Only a few of the thirty interviewees shared they still miss their study abroad program just as much now as they did when they first returned, and two of those students have already returned to their host countries after being back in the United States for approximately six months. One student shared that they were having such a difficult time upon returning to their home university, that they impulsively purchased a ticket to return to

their host country over Christmas because they were experiencing intense feelings related to reverse culture shock:

I think when I moved back and I was going through reverse culture shock, I had extra money, and I bought a ticket for December. Another impulsive decision. And so, I went back last week [interview took place in late December 2022], and I got to see everything again and hang out with some of the friends I made over there. (Dakota)

Returning to the host country or host city is one way to navigate reverse culture shock, although it is likely not the most helpful way, and it is certainly not possible for all study abroad students to do that.

Making Meaning and Integrating the Study Abroad Experience

Upon reentry, students often feel a mix of emotions. Interview participants felt torn between sadness or grief over leaving their host country and happiness or excitement about being home. So, how do students make meaning of their experiences when they express going through feelings such as these upon returning home? Interview participants reported feeling loneliness or alone a lot of the time after returning to the United States, so how can they focus on making their experiences feel meaningful, while also integrating their new “selves” into their pre-study abroad life? Integration is the merging of two or more things, usually intangible, in a way that makes them unable to be separated. It is possible that some interview participants had not been home long enough, at the time of the interview, to fully integrate their study abroad experiences into their lives post sojourn or even fully consider or realize how studying abroad changed them. Many interview participants shared that they felt they have integrated their study abroad selves with their home life, post sojourn, but they were unable to articulate how they have done that or why they think they have. Several discussed how they worked through feelings of missing or

longing for their time abroad, and some would often do this through food or music, and a few participants spoke of the inability to integrate their life abroad with life back home because some major differences in their two “lives” just could not or cannot be brought together cohesively. I will argue that the latter have just not figured out how to integrate their “two” lives, possibly because they are missing a key function of support that would either demonstrate how integration can be achieved or guide them through that process.

Some of the interview participants gravitated toward food when it came to integrating their experiences with life back home. Those who lived with a host family or who had learned to cook some host culture meals would prepare meals from their sojourn for their own families at home, in a conscious or unconscious attempt to bridge the gap between their lives abroad and their lives back home. They are attempting to share some of their experiences with their families or friends at home, while also holding onto a part of their way of life abroad. Eden, quoted above, would take this approach when they were missing their life abroad, but they also wanted to share it with their family because of the memories and joy that it brought them.

Others found themselves gravitating toward music they listened to abroad to keep the memories of their sojourn alive and combine their study abroad experience with their life back in the United States. Some interview participants continue listening to either songs that remind them of their experiences or the musical artists they had discovered while abroad as a way to hold on to their study abroad experiences. The urgency to hold onto their experiences is far greater immediately after their return than it is several months later, but music can trigger many memories of the study abroad experience. For Ellis, they returned to their home university with others from their study abroad program, and when they get together, they speak the host country’s language or more often, listen to the music from the host country. The music, in

particular, is felt to be helpful in keeping their study abroad experience alive. While continuing to listen to music from the host country is a way to integrate the study abroad experience into their lives at home, if the returnees are only doing this alone or with other returnees, are they really integrating the experience or just reminiscing?

One interview participant found themselves becoming involved differently in religious ceremonies on campus compared to their involvement prior to the sojourn. When they were asked about integration, Eden responded:

I feel like I am getting there... we had an event on campus [home university] celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe... I participated in it like I read a prayer in English, you know kind of honoring the Virgin and then we also like put roses like on an altar... and I felt like that served an example of connecting you know, like who I was in [host country] with who I am now, and sharing that experience with other people,... and like I guess this kind of connects to how I train spiritually now as well.

Having this opportunity to connect a spiritual experience from abroad with the home university and community helped Eden to integrate parts of the person they became during their study abroad experience with their life back home. Eden also went on to share that a friend from the home university participated in the ceremony as well, which led to further deepening the integration process.

Other interview participants did not mention experiential ways they have integrated their study abroad experiences into their home lives, such as food, music, or religious/cultural events, but they found themselves to be more open to meeting new people and more open to trying new things, whereas they did not feel that way prior to their sojourn. While being more open to things is a characteristic change, it also reflects how an interview participant acted while they

were abroad and how they continue acting that way upon return. It also reflects how the interview participant views the ways they have integrated the study abroad experience. When I asked if they felt they had fully integrated their study abroad life with their life back home.

Wren, who was in New York City at the time of the interview, said:

Yeah, I think so. I think I'm a bit more curious about other cultures now. Not that I was ignorant to them before. It's just that I think I have more of an interest in exploring it further, instead of just going to like a restaurant eating the food. Even just now being in New York [City] and going to like Little Italy or like Chinatown, or like kind of going to those places. I'm a bit more interested in kind of really walking through it, instead of just walking like past it.

While many interview participants continue to do a few things post sojourn that they did abroad, others expressed that they either do not believe they changed that much, so there was not a lot of integration necessary, or they have struggled to find ways of integration. When asked if they have integrated the two “lives,” Sawyer said, “No. I don't know. I guess? I don't know. I feel like I'm still like the same person just almost like an improved version of myself.” Jordan shared a similar sentiment in response to the same question, “I think it is just me. I think I have molded to it, for sure, but it feels sometimes [like] different, different worlds. But I know I'm still the same person.” Sawyer and Jordan both stated they experienced reverse culture shock upon returning home, but their reentry experiences also did not include any challenges with integrating the experiences or ways in which they have changed from studying abroad into their lives back home.

Additionally, some interview participants expressed frustration that they could not integrate their two “selves” because life back at home or back at their home university was just

too different from their life abroad and certain circumstances, such as environmental or physical locations, prevented them from fully integrated both “selves.” One interview participant, Rowan, expressed their dismay with the inability to walk everywhere like they had done living in their host city. Their host country and host city were much more walkable than their home city with dedicated sidewalks everywhere and a vast culture of walking. The citizens of the host city walked everywhere, to the grocery store, pharmacy, restaurants, to work, etc. Rowan became so accustomed to walking to school and meeting up with classmates and friends, that they were disappointed upon returning home and realizing how far apart restaurants and shops were in their hometown. Instead of a 15- or 20-minute walk, it was now a 15- or 20-minute drive. Rowan shared they just wanted to walk places after returning, and sometimes will walk outside without a destination in mind, but they are often walking alone as others are not so keen to join them:

[While abroad] even though I was walking a lot farther than I normally would, it didn't feel like it, because of how it was set up. It was a much more, much more friendly environment to pedestrians than it is in the U.S. So that's kind of a challenge having to drive everywhere or not feeling welcome to walk everywhere. I think that's another thing--like I think I met with a lot more push back to go for a walk, or to be like, ‘hey? We could just walk to the coffee shop.’ than I would while I was there.

Students in situations such as Rowan need to be prepared that others might not be as interested in their new interests or new way of doing things that they picked up while they were abroad. Preparing students to expect these situations (Expectations Model) and giving them guidance for ways in which they can communicate with others and also see these tough moments as growth opportunities (ITCCA) could change their perspectives enough to help them work through reverse culture shock without eliminating it entirely.

Finally, some students took jobs as peer advisors in their home university study abroad offices, giving them the opportunity to share their own study abroad experiences with prospective study abroad students, allowing them to reminisce about their own experiences frequently with an outlet for communicating. Working in the study abroad office gave these interview participants first-hand knowledge of events coordinated by the study abroad office for returnees, whereas the majority of students interviewed did not recall receiving any information from their home university study abroad offices about returnee events, and it allowed them to participate in those events, completing a full circle of the study abroad experience. The interview participants who are working in the study abroad office or those who have volunteered at study abroad information sessions or pre-departure events have all found the process to be rewarding and a great outlet for communication.

Comparing Study Abroad Experiences and Feelings of Superiority

Throughout the interview and coding processes, I was surprised to see a theme related to feelings of superiority emerge from interview participants comparing their study abroad programs to that of other students' programs. A few interview participants stated their program was better and/or more interesting because it was either longer, more intensive, required a second language, or had fewer students or no students from the home university. There was a sense of superiority when comparing their own programs to those of others, especially regarding time abroad or language spoken. Through the act of self-censoring, another common theme, Avery displayed thoughts of superiority, specifically when they chose not to speak about their own program because their roommate, who "only studied in London (emphasis not mine), would, like, not stop talking about it." Avery went on to say:

They don't even speak a different language there, and that was like the program that every single person went to. I was just like, 'I don't know, like that's not that great, and I was like, I feel like mine is so much better, but you will not stop talking about yours, and I find it really annoying. So, like I'm not going to talk about mine to that extent.'

Some of those who studied abroad for a year also displayed feelings of superiority when they criticized those who did not study abroad as long as them, finding it hard to believe that those who only studied abroad for a semester (or even less) could have had a meaningful experience:

I feel like you're treated more respectfully than your one-semester-off study abroad students who come in without the language. I think I succeeded better than some other American students in integrating with [host country nationals], like, I made a lot of local friends...like you run into those type of Americans, and they don't know what they're missing. They start learning the foreign language on arrival, which is a totally different approach, and that's a bubble program, and I see it happening. My [former] neighbors absolutely disdain these types of personalities. Actually, my [former] neighbor, she's Italian, she started texting me about a month after I left, and the new people that came in were 'one semester Americans'...and it's just sad. I don't want Americans to be portrayed like that.

Some interview participants felt like they did not have many people with whom they could speak about their experiences because the interviewee felt their program or experience was too different from others who went abroad, either their programs were longer and therefore better, or they integrated themselves into the host culture and country more than everyone else on their program. The unwillingness to share their experiences because of this somewhat judgmental

superiority complex or bias, which they may not have even realized they were demonstrating, was surprising to find in the data.

Ultimately, students need better preparation regarding reentry and more outlets for which they can share their experiences with others who can relate, and possibly some information regarding how impactful studying abroad can be for all students, regardless of their biases. Interview participants found ways to work through reverse culture shock, but they also craved more support and wished they had received more information about the reentry process. They felt that more information, even if it felt excessive, would have been better than no information at all, especially if the information were delivered at a time where it was most relevant, either shortly before reentry or shortly thereafter.

Communication

Communicating about the Study Abroad Experience – or not?

When interview participants were asked, “Did you have any experiences where it felt like people weren’t interested in hearing about your time abroad?” The majority of interview participants answered emphatically, “yes!” Students exhibited signs of self-censoring over and over, and the term “self-censoring” became a prominent code and later a theme of denigration during the coding and analysis process. When around family and friends who did not study abroad, interview participants either chose not to speak about their study abroad experience, or they only spoke about studying abroad if it was overly relevant to the conversation at hand. Just as discussed in Chapter Two, in a study conducted by Kortegast & Boisfontaine (2015), students are unlikely to talk about a study abroad experience unless specifically asked about it, and even when they were asked about it, the conversations were superficial at best, only getting to the tangible and or factual information regarding the sojourn and not how the returnees felt about the

experience. Ultimately, this denigration or minimization of their experiences led students to self-censor when they wanted to share. As Ellis stated, “I’m at the point where I really don’t talk about it unless people bring it up, or unless it pertains to conversation.”

Many interview participants expressed being self-conscious about sharing their experiences due to memes, Instagram reels, and Tik Tok videos poking fun at study abroad students for “always talking about study abroad,” and they did not want to become the “study abroad girl” (Rory). There were several other reasons given for censoring themselves, such as: they simply did not want to talk about their experiences abroad because they did not want to “brag” (Ellis), “come off with like any kind of superiority (Morgan), they did not want to make anyone else feel bad who did not have the opportunity to go abroad but may have wanted to go, or they felt like those who did not go abroad would not understand the experiences they were trying to describe. Immediately after arriving home, one student began self-censoring:

I remember even the car ride home. It was like I had so much I wanted to tell them, and like I felt myself not even wanting to tell them because, like, they just didn’t see it the way I did, and didn’t appreciate it the way I did. I just found myself frustrated, and like I didn’t even want to talk about it with anyone because they just didn’t understand. Like, I wanted to talk to my study abroad friends because they did understand. I felt so disconnected in like I didn’t even want to tell people or like, it just seemed like they didn’t care. (Blake)

Even after being home for several months, some interview participants still did not want to share their experiences:

I feel like I still almost try not to talk about it too much. But like obviously, if someone asks, I will. But I try not to like with my friends who didn't go abroad, or like go out of my way to talk about how amazing it was when they didn't go. (Sawyer)

Many interview participants felt this way, but as Dillon put it, “people just didn’t know what to ask because they hadn’t studied abroad before. They would ask, ‘How was (the location where they studied abroad)?’” and then I would have to take it from there to elaborate [because] they did not have any specific questions after that.” This brings up an interesting point, and something else that should be shared with students by either study abroad administrators or anyone discussing reverse culture shock. While it is possibly true that most people do not care to hear about a student’s entire study abroad sojourn, people also just do not know the questions to ask other than, “How was your trip?” or “How was _____ (insert country of study abroad here)?” So, it could be helpful to remind study abroad returnees that some people might want to hear more, but they are not knowledgeable enough about study abroad programs or how study abroad truly works to ask the right questions.

Cross-cultural communication works both ways – going abroad and upon returning home – because, as has been discussed extensively throughout this study, study abroad returnees have changed, and when they return home, home is often different from how it was before they left. Returnees come home to a culture they might not recognize anymore. Kim’s ITCCA focuses on how adaptation involves “direct and indirect contact with an unfamiliar environment,” and returning home after studying abroad can feel like that for students, what was once a very familiar environment is no longer (2008, p.363). Upon returning home, interview participants had to relearn, in some circumstances, social cues and ways to communicate with peers,

especially those who did not study abroad. Self-censoring was an adaptation to the unfamiliar environment of being home.

One place where interview participants would not censor themselves is with other study abroad returnees who had completed similar or the same programs. Communication, paired with a stressful event and the pathway to work through that stress, is a key part of the growth experience for ITCCA. Speaking with other returnees specifically helped students repeatedly with their own feelings of reverse culture shock and longing for their study abroad experience because they could relate to one another and did not need to self-censor. Through communication with others experiencing similar stressful situations or environments, students were better able to process their own reverse culture shock and work through it. On the flip side, if returnees do not have the support available to effectively communicate about their experiences studying abroad and with reverse culture shock, their self-censorship and therefore lack of desire to communicate may have prevented the growth related to ITCCA that other students, who have the support, experience.

A couple of interview participants now work in the study abroad office at their respective home universities, and they thrive on helping other students prepare to study abroad. (This is the exact way I got into the field of higher education.) This might be one of the best ways for these interview participants to integrate their study abroad selves in some way with their lives at their home universities and find outlets for talking about their experiences. Working in the study abroad office gives students the opportunity to continuously share their experiences with either their study abroad advisor or prospective study abroad students and impart the lessons they learned preparing to go abroad and living abroad. Additionally, these two interview participants have been asked to facilitate presentations regarding studying abroad and speak at pre-departure

orientations to share their own experiences. Through communication with others, free from self-censorship, the students also have the opportunity to reminisce and work through their own experiences and continuously find ways to make meaning of their experiences.

Communicating about the Experience During the Interview

When I asked the interview participants if they received any information about reverse culture shock once they returned to university, they claimed they did not receive any information about reverse culture shock from anyone at any point upon their return home or return to their home university. Some interview participants even stated the first time they had heard about reverse culture shock was when they received the recruitment email for this study, six to twelve months after returning home. It is possible (and likely) that most, if not all, of the interview participants learned about reverse culture shock prior to their sojourn or even during it, but because the information given to them was not relevant to their immediate life experiences, they did not retain the information. After returning home from studying abroad, and possibly experiencing challenges or feelings stemming from their sojourn, the recruitment email and topic stuck out to them in way that it would not have before returning home. The point is that students, even if given the information about reverse culture shock prior to studying abroad, do not recall that information upon returning home. They need to receive information at a time that is relevant to their experiences. In these cases, they need to receive information about reverse culture shock shortly before the end of their study abroad programs and again shortly after returning home.

A number of students said just talking throughout the interview helped them deal with their own reverse culture shock and experiences because they rarely have the chance to speak with someone about these experiences who truly understands them. Of course, there was not any

need to self-censor during the interview as I was asking pointed questions about their feelings and experiences. Dillon shared, “It's cool to talk about it with someone who understands study abroad well. Thank you very much for organizing this, so glad that I was able to participate.” And Samantha said, “You actually asked me a lot of good questions like I've never been asked, so it was nice...and I'm glad I was able to talk about my experience with someone.” No one has asked them specific questions about how they are feeling now after their return, what do they miss, what were they happy to have again once returning home, how did it feel when packing or leaving their host country, how does it feel that so many people do not want to listen to their experiences – all of these are important questions to discuss with some students who might be experiencing different levels of reverse culture shock. Giving students that outlet and freedom to talk, without the fear of judgement, about these specific areas and their experiences is helpful throughout the reentry process.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn the ways in which university students manage the experience of returning to the United States after studying abroad for a semester or longer. There is more to returning home than a flight, and many students experience reverse culture shock upon their return, which is sometimes completely unexpected. There is not a lot of research regarding how students make meaning of their study abroad experience while navigating reverse culture shock, including how they prepared for reverse culture shock, if at all. The goal of this study was to answer some of those questions in order to inform the literature and field of study abroad so that students can be better supported prior to and once they return home and return to university.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How did study abroad returnees envision their re-entry experience prior to re-entry? Did they prepare for it at all?
 - a. What information or experience(s) led them to have those expectations? Pre-departure orientations? Pre-return meetings? Other?
 - b. To what extent did returning students experience expectation gaps and/or expectation overlaps upon re-entry?
2. How do study abroad returnees make meaning of their study abroad experience and their return home while reintegrating into their home culture?
 - a. To what extent do study abroad returnees experience and navigate reverse culture shock?

- b. How do students communicate about their study abroad and return home experiences post-sojourn? Are these communication tactics helpful?

Most of the interview participants envisioned their re-entry experiences to be more exciting and full of people wanting to hear about their experiences, but the reality was much more bittersweet and lonelier. Returning home was great, at first, for many of the interviewees; however, they quickly realized they missed their host countries, and most people did not want to hear about their entire experiences, but rather just a snippet. Those who did want to hear about the returnees' experiences only wanted to hear the positives and surface level satisfaction. Many of the interview participants recognized that family and friends, especially those who did not go abroad, wanted to know if the entire study abroad experience was "fun" and expected short answers from the returnees, so they answered accordingly. Additionally, most of those interviewed did not truly prepare for the mental shock of returning to the United States, only the logistical pieces. The few who did prepare found it helpful to journal about their thoughts and feelings regarding their departure from the host country and returning home. There were a couple of interview participants who had a significant amount of travel experience prior to studying abroad, and those previous experiences traveling and living abroad greatly helped them to understand the reentry process and navigate it a little better than those who did not know what to expect.

Making meaning about the study abroad experience was difficult for many students as they did not feel they had the resources they needed to process everything, nor did many have enough outlets for communication. This was an expected result as making meaning about any situation can be difficult without the right guidance and support. Some interview participants did not have many people they could talk to about their experiences, and they reported feeling

isolated and sad after returning home. Those who had friends or family members, who had also studied abroad, could share stories and discuss experiences, making it easier to navigate reverse culture shock and look back upon their experiences as positive and memorable. However, nearly all of the interview participants, regardless of how well they navigated reverse culture shock, wished they had received more information about what to expect upon returning home at a time where it was relevant to them, either shortly before leaving the host country for the final time or shortly after returning home. Even some of those students who claimed not to experience reverse culture shock believe that receiving information on what to expect would have been helpful.

Through the use of the Expectations Model (Black and Gregersen, 1990) and the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (ITCCA) (Kim, 2001), the study found that students do not feel properly prepared prior to returning from a study abroad sojourn. Students need more preparation, at a time that it is relevant to them, in order to have more realistic expectations regarding the reentry process. Additionally, students are often not prepared to experience any sort of culture shock upon returning home, which requires a significant amount of cultural re-adaptation and challenges for students. The goal of this study was not to figure out ways to eliminate reverse culture shock, as it can be a major opportunity for growth and transformation for students upon reentry, especially when considering the basis of ITCCA and how challenges lead to new ways of adaptation, growth, and transformation overtime. The findings from this study should be used to inform study abroad administrators how students make meaning of their experiences, as well as what information students wish they would have received regarding reentry and reverse culture shock, how they would have wanted to receive it, and when.

Summary of the Findings

The Expectations Model

The expectations model provided structure to some of the interview questions that were asked of the interview participants. Questions related to the Expectations Model focused on first asking students about their experiences in a certain order, leading up to how they were feeling when they were on the plane leaving their host country. Prior to asking students what it was actually like to return, they were asked how they envisioned their return, from arriving at the airport to the way they would feel seeing family and friends. Once students shared their responses to what they envisioned, they were asked what the return was like for them, what happened, how they felt, and what they did upon their returns. This set of questions was followed by a question asking whether or not they felt the reality of returning met their expectations and what they had envisioned. By asking the questions in this order and manner, students were being given an opportunity to put themselves back into that time period leading up to their final days in the host country and their first few days and weeks after reentry to recall more accurately what they were doing and thinking during those times. The goal was to get the most accurate recollection possible so that the interview participants could remember not only what happened, but how the reality matched or varied from what they had actually expected would happen.

The findings of this study support the use of the Expectations Model when studying reverse culture shock experienced study abroad returnees and add to its validity in studying reverse culture shock. As shared through Chapter 4, the mismatch between expectations and reality brought about difficult experiences for many of the participants in this study. If participants had been better prepared and if their expectations had more closely aligned with

reality, the experience of returning home would not have been so difficult. Participants in the study continuously shared they wished they had received more information regarding the process of returning home. Having accurate expectations, as Black & Gregersen (1990) discussed, leads to a higher level of happiness and overall success with regard to cultural adaptation and re-adaptation. Future studies on reverse culture shock using this model could focus on whether or not students felt their expectations matched their true experiences when they have been given adequate information regarding reentry just prior to leaving the host country or returning home.

Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Returning home is a cultural experience in itself for many students. It is a transformational experience that can lead to a significant amount of growth even though the study abroad portion of the experience is technically “over.” Students return home to a culture that they sometimes do not recognize or one that they now perceive differently. During the sojourn students gain new perspectives on how other cultures view politics, treat strangers, spend time together, use less preservatives in food, and the list goes on, from every day basic situations like having fewer choices at the grocery store to larger views on things such as gun control and the legality of abortions. Students return home sometimes with opinions that are different from before they went abroad, other students might return home with beliefs that are even stronger than they were before. Interview participants were all asked questions regarding how they navigated the reentry process, the challenges they faced, how they overcame those challenges, and the way they perceived the “new” home culture. These questions tie into ITCCA as a way to measure and determine growth after a sojourn and how various forms of communication (or not communicating at all) helped students readapt to the United States. This study extends the use of ITCCA in a way that applies to study abroad students (re)adapting to the culture of their home

country, and the growth that occurs through the challenges of that re(adaptation). While ITCCA is a valuable tool for studying cross-cultural adaptation, it is just as valuable for studying the transformation and growth students experience upon re-entry and throughout the phenomenon of reverse culture shock. Although, the spiral graph used to show achieved growth still implies linear and continuous movement, whereas what returnees experience can really make their feelings and emotions jump all over, more reminiscent of a scatter plot with a nonlinear relationship. Returnees might experience the “drawback to leap” pattern that Kim describes through ITCCA, but this still simplifies or minimizes the overall experience of reverse culture shock.

Contributions to Existing Literature

This study contributes to the existing body of literature by confirming the experiences of reverse culture shock in study abroad returnees. As the literature review in Chapter Two highlighted, university-aged students do struggle with reverse culture shock after returning home from a study abroad program, and they are often not as prepared for it as they are for culture shock at the beginning of their programs. Students return home feeling as if they have changed in a major way, but they see that their friends and family, who do not study abroad, have not changed at all (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). The interview participants in this study confirmed that experience. They shared they often felt misunderstood by family and friends who were not there and have never had a similar experience.

While the focus of this study, reverse culture shock experienced by students who studied outside of the United States for a semester or longer, can be viewed as niche, the results of this study can contribute to more than just that niche area. The field of study abroad is already a small portion within international higher education and narrowing it further to the study of

reverse culture shock experienced by those who studied abroad a semester or more minimizes the impact this study might have, especially since the majority of students no longer study for a semester or longer, but rather a summer or short-term program. Prior to the onset of Covid-19, only 35.1% of study abroad students completed a program for a semester or longer (IIE, 2020) and in the most recent data 36.1% of study abroad students completed a semester or longer abroad (IIE, 2022). The conclusions drawn from this study can be applied across larger populations of students who study abroad, as well as contribute to studies involving non-students such as those who experience military, humanitarian aid, missionary, or expatriate re-entry.

This study also confirmed that many students return to the United States with a more critical view of the United States and its policies. The majority of interview participants did not return home fully rejecting everything about the United States, but most did express new perspectives and skepticisms about the United States compared to their host countries or host regions. For students who had a challenging time reintegrating into life in the United States, they tried to hold onto aspects of their sojourn, like going for walks and cooking their favorite foods or snacks from the host country. These acts were helpful for those who were struggling with reverse culture shock, and it also helped them, in some cases, open up to family and friends who did not go abroad by sharing this piece of their experiences with family and friends. This finding also supports some of the existing literature.

One area of the literature that needs more information and research is the way many students do not talk about their study abroad or reentry experiences and the ways in which they self-censor. In this study, many students felt they could not speak about their experiences because either those around them would not understand or they did not want to risk being ridiculed by “always” talking about their study abroad program. There are memes and social

media posts about students who study abroad always talking about studying abroad. There is even a joke, “How can you tell if someone studied abroad? Don’t worry, they’ll tell you!” Many of the interview participants in this study actively tried not to speak about their study abroad programs unless they were specifically asked, but even when they were asked, they knew not to divulge too much information. They shared only the basics and what they knew others wanted to hear. This is in line with some of the findings by Fanari et al. (2021) where returnees might only speak about the highlights and leave off any negative experiences. Interview participants in this study would not go into detail with someone who asked about their experience because they knew or could sense the person asking was only looking for a superficial or exciting answer. Self-censoring is an important topic, and one that needs further study with regard to study abroad returnees. Practitioners must consider how self-censoring changes the end result of reverse culture shock and the perception that students have regarding their sojourn and return home. If students are not talking about their experiences and holding everything in, are they truly processing the ways in which they have changed or the ways in which their experiences are now shaping their future? Are those students making meaning of their experiences while self-censoring?

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Field of Study Abroad

First, study abroad administrators must help manage the expectations that students have by speaking to them realistically about their programs. Some of the students interviewed for this study had unrealistic expectations regarding the language skills they thought they would gain when studying abroad. As evidenced by this study, some students did not realize they would not be fluent at the end of their semester abroad, which made them self-conscious when returning

home. Their families expected them to return fluent as well, and they did not want to disappoint their families. The students knew they had learned a lot, but they realized that fluency takes years, not a semester. Unsurprisingly, students often think they will gain fluency by studying abroad for a semester in a non-English speaking country, but as many study abroad practitioners know, it is incredibly unlikely that one semester or even one year will lead to true fluency of a language, especially for those who have not been studying the language extensively for many years prior to the sojourn. Learning another language and immersing oneself in a country or culture that speaks the language is a fantastic way to improve language skills; however, it is important that students have realistic expectations regarding their experiences. For students who do not speak the language well, or at all, and make a point that study abroad advisors or study abroad offices might need to consider what they deem as “obvious” areas in which students could struggle while abroad because the students are possibly not considering some of those things.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that the goal is not to prevent students from experiencing reverse culture shock but rather to open avenues for them to talk about their feelings and the aspects of reverse culture shock they are experiencing. Practitioners should reframe the concept of reverse culture shock by giving it a more positive name. It should simply be called a “reentry experience” or “reverse cultural adaptation.” Putting a more positive spin on the term would change the expectations of it. It would reframe the way study abroad administrators think about and describe the experience to students so that it does not have such a negative connotation from the start or imply that it will be a difficult experience and one to avoid. In addition to reframing the term reverse culture shock, students need to know what to expect and have a better understanding of reverse culture shock. Again, the point is not to

remove the experience of reverse culture shock all together but rather to prepare students and give them the information they need to recognize it. Throughout the interviews in this study, interview participants consistently stated they would have liked to receive more information about reentry and reverse culture shock, so they knew what to expect. Over and over students stated that they would have benefitted from being better informed about reverse culture shock toward the end of their programs, not prior to their sojourns when they are more focused on leaving the United States and the excitement of going abroad overshadows everything else. The interview participants also would have appreciated guidance, support, and resources made available to them so they would know what to do or where to turn in times of trouble.

Pre-departure orientations and online courses, whichever a study abroad offices choose to use, are important and valuable modes of sharing information with students prior to their sojourn. Speaking about reverse culture shock during these pre-departure orientations is helpful and should not be avoided; however, students from this study would have preferred to have received this information either toward the end of their programs or shortly upon returning home, when it would have been more relevant to them. It is not easy for a study abroad office to plan out the final days of all study abroad programs and exchanges in order to provide the information at the most ideal time for all students, but it would be possible for them to provide the information around the time of departure or returning home. Or, in the case of study abroad programs that have a coordinator who regularly meets with the students, that person should disseminate the information about reentry and reverse culture shock prior to the end of that specific program. A meeting held shortly before the end of a program would help students acknowledge any denial they are experiencing about their time abroad ending. This would give students the permission to feel their feelings and express those feelings with others who might be feeling the same way.

Sometimes it is simply a matter of giving students the vocabulary they need to actually describe how they feel or giving them the opportunity to share in a safe space with others who can relate and validate those feelings.

In addition to when students would have wanted the information, they were also asked how they would have wanted to receive it. Of course, there was a variety of answers regarding how students would have wanted to receive the information, and as most university administrators know, one size never fits all for university students. Some of the recommendations from the interviews were: a pre-return meeting held with other students from the same study abroad program, an email with brief information about reverse culture shock and the reentry process, or videos from previous study abroad returnees about their specific experiences. If a study abroad office were to permit study abroad alumni to create a video or even write a brief narrative for students currently studying abroad, it would be beneficial to have at least two or three alumni speak, preferably students who had varying levels of intensity of reverse culture shock. This would help current study abroad students see that the reentry experience differs from person to person.

Another way to support study abroad returnees is to create a study abroad alumni club that welcomes back recent returnees or hosts a returnee welcome event where the alumni can speak about their own experiences with reverse culture shock. This would allow the alumni to share their experiences, as they so often want to do, and help the recent returnees understand what might happen to them, what feelings they can expect to experience, what resources are available to them, and what helped other students. This meeting should happen each semester, maybe twice a semester, if possible. Along these lines, administrators should allow the study abroad alumni to coordinate and run this meeting themselves, with an administrator on standby

to assist if something comes up that is too challenging for a student to handle. Students are likely to be more open with one another than with administrators.

Study abroad offices should be providing study abroad alumni with outlets to speak with prospective study abroad students and students preparing to go abroad. Many of the participants of this study had a lot of advice to give, especially when I asked them what they would tell a study abroad student who was preparing to return home. Much of the advice was regarding time, and many interviewees stated they would advise future returnees to give themselves time to process the end of their study abroad program and time to work through feelings experienced due to reverse culture shock after their return. It took students a few weeks to several months to feel a sense of normalcy again. As Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (2001) indicates, growth takes time, and it took interviewees varying lengths of time to process their experiences and grow from the challenges they faced upon return. Study abroad alumni could share these things with other students preparing to return from sojourns, not just students preparing to go abroad, through short videos or essays with their advice so that those forms of communication can be shared with students preparing to return home or to university after their sojourn. The videos or essays could also be shared with study abroad students' family members (with permission, of course) to inform family members what it might be like when their student returns home after the study abroad program. This would also help family members better support the returnees.

We not only need to get students talking about their experiences, but rather we need students to be talking to the right people. As Fanari et al. concluded, students were more likely to speak about their experiences if they were speaking to others who had the same or similar experiences, in a manner of reciprocity. Including family members, especially immediate family

members, in the pre-departure orientations and clearly communicating with those family members the importance of their involvement once the student returns is also a crucial step. Students more often turn to family members and close friends for support (Niesen, 2010). Fanari is currently conducting a study where she is interviewing family members of returnees to learn more about their communication strategies and their viewpoints regarding the return process. This will be an important study to inform study abroad administrators on how they can best support students through the immediate family members.

Preparing students for reverse culture shock will not prevent all of these emotions from surfacing, which is also not the goal, but students will be less surprised when they do feel them and might not feel so alone in those feelings. Even providing a small amount of guidance could help students find better ways to recognize those feelings and how to work through them versus just sitting with them all alone. It is also important to remember that not all returnees want or need guidance or support, and those who participated in this study may have done so because they were either looking for that support or just wanted to speak about their experiences with someone who truly cared to hear what they had to say. This is part of the self-selection bias discussed in the limitations section. However, those students who do want to speak about their experiences need more than one or two outlets to do so and at least need to know where they can find other outlets, which should include professional counseling services available through the university with counselors who are knowledgeable about study abroad, culture shock, and reverse culture shock.

One final recommendation is to allow for a grace period after the end of courses and final exams for students to properly prepare themselves for returning home. This study found that many students were frantic their last few days in the host country, and they were not able to

properly prepare themselves for the end of the program. While students were able to manage the logistics of leaving, because they had no other choice, many did so while also in a state of denial about the end of the program. They did not realize the program was ending until it was over. A grace period, of even just a few days without courses or final exams/papers, could give students the time they need to internalize and realize the program is ending. Obviously, students know the day they are leaving, so even if there is not a grace period between final exams and leaving, preparing the students a month or a couple of weeks ahead of time would help them process the end of their programs better so that they are mentally preparing themselves while also preparing physically and logistically.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Future studies should focus on universities that have specifically tailored reentry programming for returnees that involve more than a pizza party or photo contest. Students should be interviewed before and after those reentry programs, and they should be compared to other studies that interviewed students who did not participate in targeted programming for returnees. This comparative data could benefit the field and push more study abroad offices to implement ways to better support their returnees. Unfortunately, there is not enough research available that studied what has worked for students and what has not worked. Not all returnee programs will reach every former study abroad student, nor will all of the programs speak to each student, but providing a variety of programming, even a small variety, would give different students the opportunity to express themselves in whichever way works best for them.

More empirical and comparative studies are needed that focus on what other universities are doing to support students and how successful those support efforts are. We can continue to make suggestions, but without the research to support those suggestions, we cannot definitively

say what is actually working or what students find the most beneficial. Again, the goal is not to remove the experience of reverse culture shock, but rather helping returnees to recognize the symptoms and how to work through their feelings of isolation, loss, loneliness, etc. Extensive longitudinal research that meets with students prior to studying abroad, while they are abroad, prior to their return, upon their return, and a few months after they return to discuss ways in which they anticipate culture shock, experience culture shock, anticipate the return experience, and work through those challenges. A study like this would take time and extensive buy-in from students and study abroad office administrators, and it would be challenging to conduct research like this without also influencing students' expectations and the ultimate outcome. However, the amount of data derived from a study like this would change the way study abroad offices create reentry programs and support students in the future.

Another interesting study that would enrich the literature would be one that focuses on students who actually feel as if the host country has become their new home and returning "home" to the United States feels foreign to them. A couple of interview participants expressed how the host country truly felt like home to them, and their only focus at the time of the interview was to figure out a way back or to fully emigrate. For the student who studied in a non-English speaking country and felt as if the host country was now their new home, it is important to note that they studied the language extensively before the sojourn and spoke it almost exclusively while abroad. Knowledge of the language and using it more than English were big factors in which students saw themselves returning to the host country at some point. This is possibly due to the acceptance they felt by their host country peers as an equal versus being seen as just another American study abroad student.

Even one of the students who studied in the United Kingdom had expressed they all but rejected their American lifestyle and the American students in the study abroad program in favor of immersing themselves in the British culture and only having British friends. This student also claimed to begin speaking with a British accent so well that other British people assumed they were from the UK and not the United States. This particular student had a deep connection with friends they made while in the UK and described the connection as more authentic or genuine than friendships back home. While the majority of the interview participants did not describe feeling this way, it would be interesting to study what changes in the minds of students who no longer feel that the United States is their home. This would inform literature beyond the field of reverse culture shock and study abroad, even beyond the field of higher education. These students need additional resources upon returning home or additional guidance on how to (legally) return to the host country to continue studying or working in the future. Students who feel like they are not returning home could struggle more than their counterparts who are downtrodden about returning home but still have a sense that it is home.

Additional studies regarding reverse culture shock and how students navigate the phenomenon would be beneficial to the fields of counseling and therapy, as well. A few interview participants expressed that they worked through their feelings of reverse culture shock and during the reentry experience by speaking with a counselor or therapist, but when the counselor or therapist does not understand the concept of reverse culture shock or might not be as aware of cross-cultural experiences, this could be unhelpful to those students seeking their services. Students want to talk to someone who understands, and study abroad offices and university administrators have a responsibility to the students they send abroad.

Finally, while there are a few research articles available that covered how Covid-19 impacted study abroad and students who were abroad during early 2020 when countries were shutting down, it would be beneficial to conduct more research on how students who had to return home unexpectedly handled their reentry and reverse culture shock experiences.

Sometimes there are situations that require students to return home early or unexpectedly from a study abroad program, such as family challenges or natural disasters, so having more information on ways to support these students would be beneficial for future students who experience similar situations. Many of those interviewed had not been on their own college campus since their first semester freshman year. Covid-19 lockdowns and university closures started in March of 2020, at which point students left their home university to study fully online. They were not on campus for Fall 2020 or Spring 2021, and many of them were not on campus in Fall 2021 either, then they studied abroad for Spring 2022. The students returned to their home universities in Fall 2022, the first semester of their senior (and likely final) year of university. For many of them, it was like starting university for the first time.

Amount of Research versus Implementation of New Ideas

As I was looking for more articles for the literature review, I was uncovering more and more research about reverse culture shock. It is still not as prevalent as the research on culture shock, but there are a considerable number of articles available on the topic. When reading these articles, theses, and dissertations, many of them said there is not enough research on reverse culture shock, but really there is not enough research or study results combined together in one place for practitioners to access. Furthermore, when I requested help in recruiting participants from other universities, I received a lot of responses of support telling me that my research on this topic is so important. Many university administrators have requested the results of my study

because they know they need to do more to support returnees. So, if there is a considerable amount of research available on this topic, why does everyone think there is not enough? Why are study abroad professionals not seeking this information or why are they not able to find it? Why are study abroad offices not doing more to address reverse culture shock when they so readily admit that it is an important topic that needs researched and discussed? Study abroad professionals should be implementing some of the ideas from all of the research available, when and where they can. It might be a matter of trial and error at first, and not every approach will work for each individual student, but doing nothing for the students definitely does not work. As noted previously, even students who did not think they experienced reverse culture shock wished they had received some information about it because it still would have been helpful to know what to expect. The challenge, as always, becomes time and availability of study abroad advisors and coordinators to implement practices directly related to reverse culture shock that would benefit a large number of the students.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDY ABROAD RETURNEE

PARTICIPANTS

(For students who participated in a study abroad experience for a semester or longer and have returned within the last two years.)

(**Recording of Zoom calls started automatically**)

(After reading the consent form and upon signed approval)

“Hello. My name is Rachael Hessenflow, and I am a PhD student in the Higher Education program at the University of Arizona. My dissertation focuses on study abroad students’ experiences upon returning home from their study abroad programs. When I was an undergraduate student, I studied abroad for a semester in Spain. Upon returning home, I obtained a job in the study abroad office as a peer advisor, which has then led to my career in higher education. I was a study abroad advisor for many years, and I have worked in international higher education for the last 15 years. With your permission, I will be recording this interview to facilitate note taking and analyzation later. This video will not be seen by anyone other than me, and I will not share your identity with anyone. I may use your direct quotes as part of my dissertation, but I will not use your real name when doing so. I will use participant codes, instead of names, when organizing the data. I have planned for this interview to last between 60 and 120 minutes. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me to talk about your experiences. I will first ask you about your background and study abroad details, then I will begin questions about your experiences prior to leaving your study abroad country, returning home, information you received previously or recall, and how you feel that you’ve changed. If at any point, you would like to stop the interview or take a break, please let me know. Your participation is completely voluntary.”

Interview questions and general order

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me about your study abroad experience.
 - a. Are you a U.S. citizen?
 - b. How do you identify ethnically, racially, or culturally?
 - i. Did this influence the location you chose for study abroad?
2. Why did you choose to study abroad?
3. Did you have the opportunity to travel much growing up?
4. If the student is not overly forthcoming about their study abroad information, such as location of sojourn or amount of time spent abroad, I will ask for those details. Where did you study abroad? How long were you abroad? Where did you live? What were your classes like? What classes did you take? Are they related to your major at Main Campus?
5. How did you choose your specific study abroad program in _____ (location)?
6. Other follow-up questions to information provided, e.g. You mentioned you wanted you wanted an independent sort of program, why? Or, you mentioned you wanted a program with other students from your university, why?
7. Do you feel that your study abroad experience changed you in any way?
 - a. Do you feel different from who you were before you studied abroad?
 - b. Do you identify yourself any differently than you did before?
8. Did you know other people studying abroad the same time you were abroad? Not necessarily the same location. If so, how often would you connect with them?
9. While abroad, do you feel you were treated differently because you're an American?
 - a. If so, how did that experience affect you?

10. How do you see yourself as an American now compared to before you left?
 - a. If student sees themselves differently now: what experiences do you think led to the change in the way you see yourself as an American?
11. What has your experience been like since you returned from your study abroad program?
12. How were you feeling the couple of weeks leading up to your return? Prior to the end of your study abroad program, did you prepare yourself for your return home?
13. Going back to the few days before your return to the United States, what were those days like for you?
14. Do you remember what you were feeling as your plane was leaving _____ (location) for the last time?
15. How did you envision re-entry, your return back to the U.S.?
 - a. What were your first few days back home like? What did you do?
 - b. Did you experience any challenges upon your return?
 - c. If yes, how did you navigate those challenges?
16. Did your expectations of returning home match your actual experience of returning home?
 - a. What have been some of the highlights of returning home?
17. How do you feel you navigated the process of returning home?
 - a. Is there anything you've done that has helped you navigate this process?
18. What has it been like to return to school?
 - a. Have you learned about or had any opportunities to attend university sponsored meetings or socials with others who also studied abroad?
 - b. What about non-university sponsored meetings or get togethers?

19. Do you keep in contact with those you met abroad?
20. Do you feel you've fully integrated or combined who you were abroad with who you are now?
 - a. If relevant, do you think your new way of identifying yourself or the changes you have seen in yourself have affected this integration?
21. Do you feel any different now than when you initially returned home?
 - a. If relevant, how long did it take you to feel "normal" again?
22. Before going abroad, did you attend any sort of pre-departure orientation? Or, were you given pre-departure materials to review?
23. Before returning home, did you attend any pre-return meetings or read any information provided to you regarding your return?
24. Have you had any close family or friends study abroad before?
25. From the time you applied to study abroad to the time you returned home, do you recall receiving any information about reverse or re-entry culture shock?
 - a. Where did you get that information?
 - b. If the participant answers affirmatively, I will ask them to tell me what information they recall.
 - c. Was the information you received and the time at which you received it helpful to you?
 - d. If/when you were experiencing challenges after returning home, did you recall any of the reverse culture shock information you received?
26. Did you receive any information about RCS once you returned to university?

- a. Do you wish you had received information about RCS once you returned to university?
27. Did you have any experiences after returning home where it felt like people didn't understand you?
- a. Did you have any experiences where it felt like people weren't interested in hearing about your time abroad?
28. Do you think there is anything that could have prepared you more for returning home? If so, what?
29. Do you think you experienced reverse culture shock?
- a. If so, what were or are some of the feelings you've experienced?
30. What would you tell someone studying abroad right now about re-entry?
31. If you had been given info about RCS, how would you have wanted to receive it and when?
32. Is there anything else you would like to share about your study abroad experience?
33. Do you have any questions for me.

“As a reminder, this video will not be seen by anyone other than me, and I will not share your identity with anyone. I may use your direct quotes as part of my dissertation, but I will not use your real name when doing so. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me to talk about your experiences. Please contact me if you have any questions after this point or if there is anything else you would like to share with me. Thank you, again.”

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